

Who will help ex-cons in Richmond? | HealthyCal

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Who will help ex-cons in Richmond?

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By **Julia Landau**

Richmond has the lowest per capita income in the Bay Area and one of the highest unemployment

rates. The city is also home to one of the biggest populations of people newly released from prison in Contra Costa County.

Ex-cons already vie for services with other needy people in the city, and more ex-offenders are expected in Richmond as a new law rolls out.

Assembly Bill 109, or prison realignment, is the biggest change in the criminal justice system in decades. This legislation puts low-level felons and parole violators in county jail instead of state prison. Upwards of 90% of these “non-serious” offenders getting transferred to county jails will return to their neighborhoods within the year.

The legislation puts in sharp focus alternatives to incarceration, and the assumption that local communities have more at stake than prisons when it comes to rehabilitation.

Contra Costa County has developed a plan for realignment. But in the city of Richmond, who will take the lead in helping the formerly incarcerated?

County officials say they support local programs, but county and local figures don’t enjoy the closest communications, and the law passed in July, leaving little time for debate or lengthy public discussions about how, exactly, resources would be allocated to the cities.

The city, in turn, has taken the issue of realignment to the public and to community based organizations. Richmond residents met with Mayor Gayle McLaughlin and Police Captain Mark Gagan in October to discuss details of realignment.

Captain Gagan, a former social worker, helped to spearhead a relatively new policing strategy in Richmond, one that opens the department to collaboration with citizen groups to prevent violence.

Now, there is a vital need for programs that focus on helping formerly incarcerated residents successfully reintegrate into society, a job historically ill-suited for police, Gagan said.

“I recognize the limits of my uniform,” said Gagan. “I see this [realignment law] as a call to action for nonprofits. People who have street credentials, and people who are from the same community as people getting out, these are the people who need to reach out.”

Tamisha Walker of the Safe Return Team has just such credentials. At the meeting, she said that some outreach is already underway, but Richmond lacks a central facility to connect returning residents with the services they need.

The Safe Return Team, an arm of the nonprofit research group Pacific Institute, has experience in readjusting to city life after prison terms. This background earns them the trust of recently released parolees, who they interview to learn about what ex-prisoners most need to stay straight.

A shakeup of local reentry services is long overdue, said Walker. She said Richmond needs a transitional housing program that ties new probationers into city services.

“You have to have the right structure for people to open up and say what they need,” said Walker. “We have services here in Richmond, it’s just that they’re not specifically geared toward reentry.”

A “one-stop shop” is the biggest missing link in the chain connecting county health and social services with grassroots and nonprofit organizations, advocates say.

Mayor McLaughlin addressed the one-stop shop at the meeting. “There are so many foreclosed homes and empty properties,” she said. “It would take some of you to come forward and say you’d allow a place in your neighborhood for formerly incarcerated people to meet.”

But neighborly impulses wane when it comes to specific locations. Tension surfaced between the need for a law enforcement presence, to deter crime on the spot, and community engagement in helping people coming back from prison start over.

Residents at the meeting insisted they want programs to help ex-cons get a new start, but worried about insufficient police presence around a one-stop shop for services.

Police, politicians, and health workers agree, Gagan said, on the need for a centralized hub for reentry services, but no formal plan yet exists.

But who will supply the funding for a hub in the hardest-hit places, like Richmond? And will such a place win the support of the broader community?

Times are already tough. Nonprofits that got funding from the public sector have taken a hit during the recession while the numbers they serve increase. Activist churches, grassroots organizations, and political associations have developed programs to help the poor. Fledgling projects must vie for private grants and compete for a small pot of available money from the county.

Contra Costa County’s Sheriff, Probation, and Health Services Departments will divvy up the bulk of the \$4.5 million realignment fund, with over half going to new staffing of jails and courts, and a fifth towards an increase in mental health and social services.

Partly due to the state’s budget crisis, and partly due to the disjointed agency coordination around the parolee population, law enforcement finds itself in new territory, said Chief Probation Officer Phil Kader.

Rehabilitation programs are part of the realignment package, said Kader, who is overseeing realignment for Contra Costa County. Kader said that probation officers will “act as caseworkers” for the clients they supervise, and the Chief hopes to hire consultants from groups that work inside prisons to prepare people for reentry who are up for release.

But the funding dedicated to programs for ex-prisoners themselves — prep courses for the GED and anger management counseling — must also cover new training for probation officers, whose duties will expand into social work territory, according to a recently released plan by the Community Corrections Partnership, the realignment planning group.

Recently, Kader invited local groups to the meetings of the Community Corrections Partnership, opening the lines to the experience and recommendations of people who work on the ground with the reentry population.

“We are trying to do everything we can with the limited resources [the state] is giving,” said Kader.

With AB 109 funding already dedicated, nonprofit organizations that need additional money will have to appeal for federal grants or funds from the private sector, but the meetings could provide a forum for new professional alliances to form between county agencies and local activists.

They could also be a chance for Richmond’s advocates to lobby for a greater share of future realignment funding than say, relatively serene Walnut Creek.

Most residents of Richmond, with its high arrest and incarceration rate, know about the “revolving door” of prison – the cycle of young men disappearing from communities and reappearing on parole, as they get older.

A spate of territorial gun violence broke out in the city this summer, with 12 homicides in July and August alone, prompting the creation of a gang task force.

Richmond communities have for years sought means of “interrupting” this cycle, a term used by violence prevention initiatives around the country. They include mentor associations in high schools with violence problems, neighborhood conciliators like the Office of Neighborhood Safety, and community-based policing.

The current approach is a mixture. Cops and state parole agents work in tandem with Richmond’s Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS), a non-police agency modeled on the Ceasefire, a program in Chicago and Boston aimed at preventing retaliatory violence. According to an ONS report, they try to “engage and stave off the city’s 60-80 most likely shooters and/or most likely to be shot.”

These interventions can help, but many say the most important work is done inside prisons, before the drama of street life has a chance to interfere, and through reentry programs that match up returning individuals with opportunities.

Jeff Rutland, 48, was born and raised in Richmond. He was released from prison in 2010 after serving time on a robbery charge.

Seeing no options in Richmond, he went to the nearest housing program specifically for parolees, Volunteers of America (VOA) in Oakland, which contracts with the state parole agency to provide transitional housing for parolees. VOA recently announced it could no longer support Richmond residents, who sometimes outnumbered those from Oakland.

At VOA, Rutland said, he went on job interviews, reported home by curfew, and banked 60 percent of each new paycheck once he was employed.

Along with Tamisha Walker and three others, Rutland works as a researcher for the Pacific Institute’s Safe Return Team, and as a mentor at Urban Tilth, a local organic farming group.

Rutland is skeptical that a shift in the criminal justice delivery system will do anything to help Richmond’s problems, which he thinks have more to do with poverty and joblessness than with crime per se.

“They’ve tried this before,” he said. “When I first went to prison in 1983, you did your time in the county. Instead of saying the system is broken, they’re trying to patch it up.”

While he acknowledged that San Quentin had some meaningful, volunteer-run services for prisoners still inside, most incarcerated people return home feeling cut-off without options, and branded as a criminal.

“Why is it we can always find the money to lock people up, but we can’t find the money for these reentry and pre-release services?” said Rutland. “The funds are dried up when you want to employ a former prisoner, or train him.”

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