

Federal Glover: Voters may be asked to pay for rehabilitation of inmates

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I had the opportunity to sit on a panel on Nov. 2 on the impact of the transfer of low-level offenders from the state prison system to Contra Costa County's jails and probation department. The panel, which also included Supervisor Mary Piepho, Antioch's other representative on the Board of Supervisors. The panel was convened by State Sen. Mark DeSaulnier at the Antioch City Hall.

The state's correctional system is undergoing a massive reform. Since Oct. 1 the county has been receiving inmates from state prisons to save the state money and to provide a process wherein the low-level offenders will have a better chance at re-entering and reintegrating themselves into the communities from which they came.

The county is not unprepared for "realignment." We anticipated a shift almost two years ago when federal courts ordered the state to reduce its prisoner population because of health and safety concerns. The U.S. Supreme Court agreed with the lower court last spring.

In the interim, Contra Costa developed a strategic plan to deal with the returning inmates. It involves creating the infrastructure involving county agencies and nonprofit groups in coordination with each other to provide services to the inmates so that they can successfully reintegrate into their communities and minimize the possibility of recidivism.

In many ways, the county is better equipped to address the rehabilitation efforts of these inmates because

state prisons have drastically reduced these services. County and local organizations are more

connected to the local communities.

Keep in mind, with a 70 percent recidivism rate, it is clear that the old system of mandated sentences coupled with reduced rehabilitative programs by the state was not working. Instead, it has become a revolving door for the inmates who were not able to successfully adjust to life outside prison bars.

The inmates being transferred from the state prisons are going directly into county jails or under the supervision of the county's probation department. Fortunately, the county has the space to accommodate them.

The returning inmates are those with low-level convictions, which have been categorized as "non, non, non," which means nonviolent, nonserious and nonsexual offender. No one with a conviction that is related to violence, drug-related, gun-enhanced, or have gang connections will be released.

Those who pose the least risk may be allowed to return to their communities. Some will still be monitored electronically. A small number with the least risk of re-offending may be released.

According to Contra Costa County Probation Chief Officer Phil Kader, who was also on the panel, based on the few dozen released thus far, about 37 percent are from East County, which is proportionate to the number of people living in this region compared with the rest of the county.

The \$4.5 million given by the state to Contra Costa for realignment is not enough and is far less than

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the amount spent by the state prison system per inmate. The county estimates that it needs \$12 million to properly house, monitor and start the rehabilitation process of the returning inmates. The amount the county received from the state is only good for nine months. There is no funding mechanism for continued financing beyond the first year.

Gov. Jerry Brown has vowed to provide full funding for his realignment plan. There have been reports that he would seek permanent funding through the initiative process.

The County Supervisors Association of California, where I chair the Justice Subcommittee, has already submitted to the Attorney General's office a constitutional amendment that would guarantee funding for realignment. Voters will get a chance to look at the proposition in November of 2012. I hope voters will see the wisdom in funding this new amendment.

The county's application for a Second Chance Grant from the Department of Justice didn't meet the muster of grant reviewers. The grant would have implemented the county's re-entry strategic plan to provide rehabilitation services, job training, housing, family reunification and a host of health care needs.

The full program of rehabilitation and reintegration for the inmates will demand more funding and I hope the public will see the wisdom in funding this option if and when the proposal is put before them. At the same time, the county is seeking other sources to supplement the re-entry program.

Putting the question of funding before the voters in this economic climate is a risky proposition but the county cannot say no to the state. Voters will have to face hard choices next year but the reality is we will end up paying -- one way or another.

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