

DOC wants to partner with community groups to aid inmate re-entry

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"Public safety is our mission"

J. David Donahue

Commissioner

SOUTH BEND -- "Public safety is our mission," Commissioner J. David Donahue of the state Department of Correction told a local audience Wednesday.

Donahue came to South Bend to garner community support for the DOC's new prisoner re-entry program. That was just one way Donahue described how he's made changes this year to do more with no more spending.

With 15,000 inmates to be released in 2005, Donahue's goal is to improve offenders' readiness to go back to their communities and be successful.

Eventually, "97 percent of DOC inmates will get out," he said.

Of top importance, Donahue said, is to improve upon the recidivism rate.

DOC data show that nearly four out of 10 inmates return to prison within three years, he said.

Admitting his program carries a risk, Donahue explained some offenders "fail because the environment does not support them."

He discussed problems offenders have finding housing, transportation, a job to support themselves and even getting a check cashed.

To help, inmates now are being released with a state identification card. The entire re-entry program now begins months rather than days before release.

"I need your help. I can't say that loud enough," Donahue told the local group of criminal justice officials, community corrections board members, agency staff members and interested citizens at Ivy Tech Community College.

Donahue said he's counting on local agencies such as community corrections, parole and probation to provide the support for the "Road to Re-entry" programs to work.

Among the increased DOC services for inmates being release is a new Internet site www.reentry.in.gov.

The goal is for the Web site to include resources in each community for released inmates, Donahue said, in areas such as free and low-cost medical and mental health services, homelessness, food stamp access, housing, subsidies for heat assistance, transportation and employment.

"We need to know who's got what, and what the available services are," Donahue said.

He anticipates people could refer to the list in public libraries. He also plans to include services for inmate families.

He praised the volunteers and small faith-based programs the commissioner said will be vital to the success of what the DOC is doing.

To assist offenders with the transition, Donahue said he would like to add 700 work- release beds throughout the state to augment three current DOC work-release facilities, including one in South Bend.

Donahue acknowledged the plans are not without risk

To ease some public concerns, if the state receives a federal grant the DOC will start an automatic victim notification program about an inmate's release, Donahue said.

Peter Deputy, president of St. Joseph County's community corrections advisory board, said afterward, "Virtually everything he talked about is a component of our mission."

The local board has been studying how best to expand its residential work-release program, and Deputy was gratified by what he heard.

Deputy is hopeful that when Donahue sees the successes of St. Joseph County's program, including a pilot program for women, there will be financial support given to help expanding the number of residential beds from 20 to 50 or 60.

"I'm encouraged by support that hasn't been shown in the past" said Deputy of approach of the DOC commissioner and his assistants.

About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.