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Proposed facility would offer crucial housing to ex-cons rejoining society

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Seldom have statistics so clearly indicated a problem - and an equally obvious solution.

If the Indiana Department of Correction agrees, Allen County could soon provide the temporary housing needed to bridge the often-treacherous gap between prison and a productive, law-abiding life on the outside.

Nothing has been decided, but Allen County officials are discussing construction of a 200-bed facility - probably downtown - that would house participants in county work-release programs and inmates returning to the community after release from prison.

“Housing is our most serious problem (in the criminal-justice system),” said Allen Superior Judge John Surbeck, who runs the county's re-entry court program, which provides early release from prison in exchange for participation in various rehabilitative programs. About 400 newly released prisoners return to Allen County each year, and find it difficult or impossible to benefit from re-entry court, work-release or other programs because they have no place to live.

That's why the need for transitional housing is so clear: About 75 percent of inmates who have no permanent home will be back behind bars within one year of their release.

If the DOC provides enough money - and nobody seems sure exactly how much would be needed - the most likely spot for the multimillion-dollar facility is the county-owned parking lot on South Calhoun Street across from the county jail. The building could also house Sheriff Ken Fries' 95-bed work-release program and the county's Community Corrections department, both of which supervise people convicted of crimes as they work, stay at home or move about the community.

The current Community Corrections building at 201 W. Superior St. could then become Fries' headquarters, consolidating operations now at the courthouse and in the decrepit Kidder Building on Lima Road. That would effectively scrap previous plans for the Sheriff's Department to move into the former credit union building at 4813 New Haven Ave., which the county bought for \$336,000 just last year.

Does this idea sound far-fetched? Perhaps. But there's also plenty of merit to it. For one thing, Fries said, the county had pledged to spend about \$1.5 million renovating the New Haven Avenue building for his use. The current Community Corrections building, he said, would require far fewer modifications - meaning much of that \$1.5 million could go toward the new building. The county could also try to sell the New Haven Avenue property, which most observers say was purchased for a moderate price.

For another, Surbeck said, it costs the state about \$60 per day to house one inmate - or about \$21,000 per year. Every inmate released early saves the DOC money, so it should be more than willing to spend some of that money on housing for Allen County's re-entry program. The DOC was unavailable for comment.

Then there's this: Consolidating similar work-release programs in a single building should produce some cost-savings efficiencies and could allow Fries to put as many as 12 officers back on the streets.

There are still plenty of hurdles to overcome, of course - and not all of them financial. County Commissioner Bill Brown, for example, wondered, given the room, whether city and county police would now seize the chance to operate from the same building. Also, would the presence of hundreds of ex-cons be perceived as an impediment to downtown revitalization efforts? And county employees currently park in the downtown lot. They would have to go somewhere. Nor is Fries willing to wait forever for a decision. The conditions at the Kidder Building that led County Council to buy the New Haven Avenue property have not improved in the last year.

In April I wrote about John Martin, who had been released after seven years in prison on a battery charge. With the help of the St. Vincent DePaul Society, he was living in a hotel but had just \$2.37 in his pocket. Also, the grant keeping him on his feet was going to run out in a few days. He was worried he'd have to commit another crime and return to prison if his luck didn't change soon.

He stopped by The News-Sentinel a few weeks ago, saying he had just started a lawn-care business. But late fall is not exactly the best time of year for that sort of thing, and when I called this week the number had been disconnected. I hope he's doing well but, statistically, the odds are against it.

This proposal could help even those odds, and deserves serious consideration here and in Indianapolis.

Kevin Leininger's column reflects his opinion, not necessarily that of The News-Sentinel. Contact him at kleininger@news-sentinel.com, or call 461-8355.