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Ex-con transitional housing explored

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When convicted felons leave Indiana prisons early, many of them walk away on parole with less than \$100 in their pockets and little supervision.

Some heading to Allen County go through an intensive court-supervised program aimed at easing them back into the community and keeping them from returning to prison again. But many inmates are ineligible because their housing doesn't meet stringent program requirements, leaving them prone to trouble and a possible return to prison.

Allen County and state officials would like to give these people – as many as 150 – a safe place to live so they can participate in the program, called Re-Entry Court.

Completing the program could help them stay out of the court system, officials said.

Although officials are still debating whether to provide such housing and how it would be financed, county leaders are strongly considering using county property across from the Allen County Jail on Calhoun Street and adjacent to Headwaters Park.

But at least one official opposes the proposed downtown location, saying it might hinder downtown development efforts.

"I'm frankly opposed to putting that downtown," Allen County Prosecutor Karen Richards said. "I think it flies in the face of everything we've tried to do to bring people downtown."

A working concept

State and local officials have been studying the concept of providing transitional housing since early last year when the state offered to provide some funding.

But such a building and programming are still in the early stages of discussion, said Chief Deputy Dave Gladieux with the Allen County Sheriff's Department. Gladieux and Sheriff Ken Fries are part of a group of local stakeholders working with state officials to determine whether such a building is needed and where it could go.

A budget needs to be worked out, plans and drawings created and funding approved by the state and county, Gladieux said.

Despite the decisions and work yet to be done, Gladieux hopes to see this project move ahead early this year, in part because it affects decisions on where a new sheriff's headquarters might be located.

If Community Corrections staff move into the proposed new building for people released from prison, the current Community Corrections building at Harrison and Superior streets would be available. Renovating the seven-year-old building to make room for sheriff's patrol officers, detectives and

records staff would be cheaper, Gladieux said, than rehabilitating the former bank building the county bought along New Haven Avenue in August 2006 for the sheriff's department.

The sheriff's department needs a new building to replace the dilapidated Kidder Building north of Carroll and Lima roads where many department staff work.

Except for finding a place for sheriff's staff, stakeholders have no deadline for making a decision, Allen Superior Court Judge John Surbeck said.

Officials are taking their time to provide housing that will meet the community's needs, not something that the county would regret, he said.

"Nothing is settled," he said. "Nothing's going to happen overnight."

A place to stay

About 400 state prisoners are released and return to Allen County each year, said Stan Pflueger, spokesman for the county's Community Corrections department, which also runs Re-Entry Court.

Forty percent of the state prisoners deemed ineligible for the Re-Entry Court program were rejected because they lacked sufficient housing, Pflueger said. Having a permanent, drug-free place to stay with a phone line is a requirement of the program.

Re-Entry Court participants in Allen County currently spend part of the program on electronic monitoring, requiring a land-line phone without call waiting. Offenders and people they live with are subject to unannounced searches of the entire home, which can be invasive to other residents, Pflueger said.

2007, 64 offenders completed the county's Re-Entry From July 2006 to June Court program, but 108 didn't complete it, Pflueger said.

In 2006, 304 offenders were not accepted. Of those, 114 didn't participate because they didn't have a place to stay or their housing option didn't meet the requirements of Re-Entry Court, Pflueger said.

Not all of those who return to the home they left before entering prison complete the program, and Community Corrections staff suspect it's because they are returning to a bad environment, he said.

Those who don't participate are released on parole. They are given \$75, some clothes and sent home with little supervision, Gladieux said.

"Let's face it," he said. "If we don't help them we're going to see them again."

Reducing recidivism is the main goal of providing transitional housing, Gladieux said.

If the county doesn't provide some housing options and expand programs like work release, which provides low-security dorm-style housing that allows offenders to leave for work, offenders will find their way back into the county jail and the justice system, he said.

Many of those offenders also end up homeless and seek help from local shelters, said Mary Etheart, director of Hope House, a shelter for women.

"We need to do something in Fort Wayne," she said. "It is important for the Re-Entry Court and the DOC to work with the rest of us in trying to find housing for everybody."

The state recognizes the need to provide housing as it tries to push participation in Re-Entry Court for all offenders leaving the state's prisons, said Dean McMurray, Community Corrections director for the department.

McMurray said it's good correctional practice to ease the offenders back into the community with the support that they need to stay out of trouble. Monitoring those offenders also improves a community's safety, she said.

Allen County would decide what type of offender and which people could participate in a housing program. But officials are leaning toward allowing only those who have spent at least five years in prison because they have been away longer and presumably would need more help easing back into the community.

Sex offenders out

Sex offenders would not be included because of the building's proposed location next to Headwaters Park, said Sheila Hudson, director of Allen County Community Corrections. State law prohibits certain sex offenders from living within 1,000 feet of a school or public park.

How many offenders the building could house depends on how much state and local funding is available for construction, Pflueger said.

"We would love to have a facility that would have upwards of 100 to 150 beds," he said.

But adding beds for other types of offenders with different security needs, like those currently serving time locally on work release, would require more space. Providing office space for parole staff and probation officers could also increase the price tag, he said.

County officials are considering building Community Corrections' new home across from the Allen County Jail on what is currently a parking lot for jail staff on South Calhoun Street. The housing facility would not be in a residential area, Gladieux said.

The building's size, however, affects its final location, Pflueger said.

But just what type of offender would live there and how secure the building would be concern Richards.

The Allen County prosecutor opposes putting a low-security facility downtown to house violent offenders because the offenders could come and go as they please. She's concerned it could deter people from moving downtown, attending a baseball game at Harrison Square or visiting nearby Headwaters Park.

"They should be living somewhere where they're not going to make their neighbors feel unsafe," she said.

But Richards is also not convinced that housing all of those offenders on one site is a good idea. She questions whether different facilities for different threat levels might be a better option. She also suggested that Community Corrections could provide its programming in a rural setting as easily as it does downtown and that transportation could be provided to the offenders.

"There's lots of options that we haven't explored yet," Richards said.

But Surbeck argued that the Community Corrections department needs to be downtown near other county offices and the Courthouse. For control, the staff should be in the same building as the residents. To find and keep jobs, the residents need access to reliable transportation, he said.

And allowing former prisoners to live in a low-security building is better than if they were living under local bridges or have no supervision, Surbeck said.

"We will be more secure than we are now," he said.

County Commissioner Nelson Peters said local leaders are putting together a budget for the project for the state to consider. He is hopeful the Department of Correction will help pay to construct such a building as well as cover some of the operation costs, Peters said.

The Department of Correction has already earmarked funding for Allen County's proposed facility based on a previously submitted county plan, McMurray said.

The state awarded the county \$833,000 to go toward the transitional housing million in its proposal, project for this fiscal year. The county requested \$1 according to the Department of Correction.

But the county would have to come up with additional money to build or renovate a building. Part of the \$1.5 million set aside to renovate a New Haven Avenue bank building designated for the sheriff's department could be used for the transitional housing project. Selling the bank building could also provide more money for the project, Peters said.

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