

Published: January 11, 2008 6:00 a.m.

Housing for ex-convicts



Surbeck

When inmates are released from state prison and return to Fort Wayne – or any other city – the very first problem many face is finding a place to live.

They may have no family back in their hometown. Or their relatives may not want them. Or their relatives may well want them – but immediately threaten their parole because the relatives themselves may be bad influences and engage in criminal activity.

Lack of housing is one of the main stumbling blocks keeping returning offenders from living the straight and narrow. Allen County officials are right to explore the possibility of offering such housing.

Whether that housing should be downtown, an idea under consideration, is worthy of debate and should not be rejected out of hand.

Having no place to live limits the ability of many to participate in the county's Re-entry Court, the innovative program Superior Court Judge John Surbeck oversees that helps ex-convicts acclimate to the community and workforce while monitoring their movements. The program has successfully reduced the recidivism rate of returning offenders.

County officials are examining the possibility of building a structure across Calhoun Street from the Allen County Jail. It would include temporary housing for offenders, as well as offices for Community Corrections, the county program that provides the Re-entry Court services and monitors criminals on home detention. Officials are open to including other public safety-related operations there.

Some officials, including Prosecutor Karen Richards, question placing what is essentially an apartment building housing ex-convicts downtown at a time when the city is building its image. But the reality is that under this plan, the offenders would be living in the shadow of numerous police officers and across from a building where hundreds of prisoners are kept. In addition, many returning offenders are already living downtown, at the Fort Wayne Rescue Mission.

And there will be some opposition to building it anywhere.

Financing the multimillion-dollar building is a big, complicated question. The county already has an \$833,000 state grant for transitional housing, which is supposed to be spent by June 30, but state government is unlikely to provide all the money upfront to building a new structure.

But a combination of state grants and reimbursements could make payments for such a building.

About 400 offenders are released from prison and return to the community each year, whether they have a place to live or not.

Having housing available to them is a vital first step in working to prevent them from offending again and creating new victims.

Copyright © 2008 The Journal Gazette. All rights reserved. News service copy is used with permission. The information contained in the report may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without the prior written authority of The Journal Gazette or granting news service.