

Local plan would give housing to ex-inmates

By Dionne Waugh
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Allen County would be the first locality in Indiana to provide transitional housing to offenders returning to the community if the county goes forward with a project under review by a local advisory board.

The Community Corrections Advisory Board agreed during its January meeting to research an offer from the Indiana Department of Correction that would pay for the housing, which board members say is crucial for offenders to successfully reintegrate into society.

But even at this preliminary stage, the project is already generating controversy from those who wonder where the housing would be and who might be eligible, such as sex offenders.

Allen Superior Court Judge John F. Surbeck said housing is the biggest challenge for Re-Entry Court participants and that it's the one aspect they've not been able to bring under control.

"They have to have the basics of life in order to do anything beyond just surviving," he said.

If approved, Allen County would be the first area in the state to provide transitional housing, said Java Ahmed with the Department of Correction. The percent percent funding for the first year, 75 county would receive up to 100 percent during a third year. the second year and 50

Federal money, user fees and project income would also support the effort, which Surbeck said would never become a burden to Allen County taxpayers. Although there would be an initial local match, the county would be reimbursed, he said.

Allen County has been identified as a county in need of transitional housing, Ahmed said, and the county's nationally recognized Re-Entry Court has shown how successful the program is in reducing recidivism.

The transitional housing program, if approved, would start with Re-Entry Court participants, Surbeck said. Re-Entry Court is an intensive, court-supervised mentoring program intended to help offenders in their transition from prison to freedom. Counting the 125 participants in Re-Entry and inmates who've had to decline being in Re-Entry because they had no place to live, Surbeck said, about 40 percent have struggled with finding a residence.

Stan Pflueger, public affairs director for Allen County Community Corrections, said it can be hard for offenders to find family or friends who are willing to deal with the electronic-monitoring supervision requirements, which requires a telephone line without special calling features such as call waiting. Additionally, family members may not like allowing police to come in and search the home, which is part of the program.

Family and friends may also not provide the best environment for returning offenders, Pflueger said, if they themselves use drugs or alcohol.

"Even if they're law-abiding, it's a little bit intrusive," Pflueger said. "Sometimes offenders have burned so many bridges with family and boyfriends and girlfriends, they just don't want to put up with the behavior.

"So the obvious answer is some kind of facility that is controlled by us, or operated by us, that would be a good environment to come in and back to."

Surbeck anticipates some neighborhoods will not want the facility near their homes.

"I think Re-Entry Court has established a pretty good relationship with neighborhoods," he said, "so we will go back and talk to them so they understand how it's providing more rather than less security."

Allen County Prosecutor Karen Richards said she supports additional research of the proposal but that no one knows the pros and cons.

"I think the people in the (Department of Correction) are going to come back to this community anyway so there is something to be said with assisting their re-entry," she said, "but we also need to be careful because if we're going to provide housing to sex offenders, there's going to be few places where they can live. So I think that will be a difficulty."

Surbeck said it's too early to determine whether sex offenders, who face strict restrictions on where they can live, will be housed at the facility. It's also too early to say whether both men and women will be housed, he said.

"They are coming back. We can't prevent them from coming back. They've got to live somewhere," he said of sex offenders. "We'd rather have them living in a supervised location."

Richards said her other concern is that the facility would draw offenders from other communities to Allen County.

"We have enough sex offenders and other offenders. We don't think we need anyone else's offenders," she said.

But Richards said if it helps reintegrate offenders into the community and do something positive with their lives, it's definitely a benefit.

" she said. "If it goes "The question is, 'Will giving them housing do that?' forward, offenders will have to do what they need to do to become a plus to the community."

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