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Convicts come home

County Council members are scheduled to vote today to approve spending nearly \$1.5 million in state and federal grants as part of a plan to give returning felons a temporary place to stay when they are released from prison. Here's a look at the plan and why it's a good idea for local residents.

Q. What is the plan?

A. Community Corrections, the county program best known for overseeing criminals who must wear ankle bracelets for home detention, wants to lease the vacant hotel on West Coliseum Boulevard and visible from Interstate 69 to house inmates when they are released from prison. The hotel was more recently a Quality Inn but was known for years as the Holiday Inn Northwest.



Clint Keller | The Journal Gazette

Community Corrections officials are considering leasing the former Holiday Inn Northwest to temporarily house felons being released from prison.

The plan is still a work in progress and is contingent on, among other factors, entrepreneur Jerry Henry's buying the building from the current owners, who recently made good on back property taxes.

Q. How much money will this cost Allen County and its taxpayers?

A. None, directly. Though tax-financed state and federal grants will pay for the program, local government will pay none of the costs.

The county recently received \$775,000 from the state to offer housing for released inmates, on top of about \$650,000 last year. The council will vote today on appropriating that money plus an additional \$58,000 from another fund.

Q. Why should the state and federal government pay for a place for convicted criminals to live?

A. For one thing, it's cheaper than prison. Under the early-release program, criminals can be released from prison nearly four months early. Those coming to Allen County participate in the Re-Entry Court program, which helps returning ex-cons return to society.

Depending on the felon's record and personal issues, the program can help with basic life skills, interviewing skills and even finding jobs.

Those going through the program are less likely to commit new crimes, providing an additional savings to taxpayers.

Q. Will this be safe and secure?

A. Anyone staying at the former hotel would be wearing an ankle bracelet and be monitored. Confinement officers will guard the place.

Q. Should the county wait to see what happens with the City-County Building and Renaissance Square before proceeding?

A. No. For one thing, the old hotel is already equipped with sleeping rooms and a kitchen and will require relatively minor renovation.

Perhaps more important, the plan would require no up-front capital spending on the county's part.

State money, plus user fees, will finance the operating costs.

Q. Why should the government let prisoners out early and then help them when many other citizens who don't break laws are struggling?

A. The prisoners *are* coming back to Allen County, no matter what.

Finding a place to live is the top barrier for returning inmates, many of whom have no family members who will take them in.

Placing them in a supervised, secure facility is much better for both them and the community than having them live on the streets, where they are more likely to commit new crimes.

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