

VIEW



COLUMN

House's aim will be to put criminals' lives in order

By *Kevin Leininger*
of *The News-Sentinel*

Last year's federal stimulus bill may have been a bloated, budget-busting boondoggle, but at least a fraction of that \$787 billion seems to have been well spent right here in Allen County.

With the help of \$650,000 in Washington funny money and \$500,000 in annual support from the state, Allen County Community Correction's Kelley House is scheduled to open around Labor Day. And if the prospect of spending that much on a residential facility for offenders battling substance-abuse and mental-health issues doesn't seem like a wise investment to you, the department's executive director begs to differ.

Such people "are four times more likely (than other offenders) to end up back in jail," said Sheila Hudson, whose new project is being watched closely by state officials who could duplicate it elsewhere if the experiment reduces that recidivism rate – salvaging lives and tax dollars in the process.

Frankly, the link between mental illness and criminal behavior has only recently begun to receive the attention it deserves. When I wrote a column in April about a mother's desperate campaign to get help for her bipolar son serving eight years in prison for robbery, Allen Superior Judge John Surbeck told me that "most of the people I see (in court) probably have some type of mental illness." That reality is reflected in the 125 Community Corrections clients wearing electronic monitoring devices – at least 25 percent of whom are dealing with mental-health issues, Hudson said.

Currently, those people receive care through Park Center or other providers. But whatever the quality of that care, the reality of substance abuse and mental illness often undermines its effectiveness. Every personal crisis provides an opportunity to miss a counseling session, avoid medication or to rediscover self-destructive habits.

That's what makes the Kelley House different – and so potentially valuable.

With beds for about 50 men and the ability to accommodate another 50 on an outpatient basis (and perhaps women later on), the facility at 2720 Culbertson St. will provide a "captive environment" designed to ensure participants get the help they need. While living there for six months or so, residents will live on a strict schedule that combines treatment with programs intended to improve personal habits and work skills. People living there will wear electronic monitoring devices and will be tracked so staff members will know when they are not where they're supposed to be – thereby keeping small problems from escalating into bigger ones.

The facility, named for the late Fort Wayne businessman Jim Kelley, is located in the former Washington House, a drug- and alcohol-rehab center that closed four years ago and was given to the county last year. Renovation cost just \$150,000, mostly because much of the painting and other work was done by Hudson's staff.

"This just makes sense. A lot of these people just never learned coping skills," said Deputy Director Ken Scheele, who wrote the stimulus grant and knows that the program will be judged by whether it can break the cycle that until now has made a return to jail all too common.

And that remains a tall order, despite everybody's best intentions.

Hudson knows keeping the Kelley House open year after year will require ongoing financial support, in part from fees paid by working residents. So the facility will work with Blue Jacket Inc., a program that tries to match offenders with jobs, to improve its residents' work skills and employment opportunities. With the proper treatment and medication, Hudson said, residents will be "very skilled and employable."

In addition to a staff of about 15, Kelley House will also work with Park Center to provide mental-health services. Program Facilitator John Muhammad is a Park Center employee, and said he is optimistic Kelley House's unique model "will enhance what we were already doing."

As I said, there's no guarantee this will work. In this economy, finding a job for anybody – let alone the addicted and mentally ill – is no easy task. Will the funding hold out? Will neighbors accept the Kelley House?

But if the challenges are great, the need and potential are greater still. These people are here, after all, and it is in everyone's interest to see that they are kept secure, treated, taught and, if possible, rehabilitated. The Kelley House is therefore a worthy experiment – one we should all hope succeeds.

*This column is the commentary of the writer and does not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of The News-Sentinel.
E-mail Kevin Leininger at kleininger@news-sentinel.com, or call him at 461-8355.*