

Commentary: Good reentry programs save money and help people

by Lesley Weidenbener

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INDIANAPOLIS – Allen County Superior Court Judge John Surbeck doesn't mince words.

Prisons, the judge says, are not places where people get better.

Surbeck is quick to point out that he's not criticizing corrections officials when he says that. A prison's first responsibility, he argues, is to make sure that people who have done horrible things stay isolated from the rest of us so that we're protected from them. He says that Indiana's corrections system does a great job at that.

But that's only half the challenge, Surbeck says. At some point, he notes, most prisoners will come back out and walk among us again. Often, the time they've spent in prison has done nothing to solve the problem that put them behind bars in the first place.

And, too often, the time in prison actually has made the problem worse.

There is a reason people sometimes call prison a finishing school for career criminals.

Judge Surbeck and I are talking during a radio show just a couple of months after U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Roberts presented Surbeck with the 2012 William H. Rehnquist Award for Judicial Excellence. A large part of the reason Surbeck won that highly coveted national honor involved his work with establishing and running the Allen County Reentry Court, an innovative program that helps prepare prisoners to rejoin society more effectively after they are released.

We're joined in the conversation by Steven Kever, the superintendent of the Indianapolis Re-Entry Educational Facility, and Michael Coffy, a resident at the facility.

Surbeck, Kever and Coffy come to the problem of moving people from prison to productivity from different points in the system.

Coffy has served time for a felony. He says he had substance abuse problems that led him to succumb to the temptations of "the life on the street." He's working now to rebuild his life.

Kever oversees an institution designed to do that. It provides residents with substance abuse treatment, with career counseling and training and with chances to further their educations.

Surbeck, of course, sees the problem from the bench. He notes that, without some sort of intervention, the



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people he has sentenced a first time often will end up before him again – and, all too often, it will be because they've committed a more serious offense the second time.

Breaking that cycle requires more than harsh sentencing.

If the prisoner returns to life outside without marketable skills or any hope of getting those skills, then the chances that he or she will commit another crime climb dramatically.

Coffy says two related fears dominate the thoughts of prisoners who want to turn their lives around.

The first is that they won't be able to find jobs. The second is that, without a job, they will fall back into the life that led them to prison in the first place.

Surbeck says this is the pattern we need to break.

The judge makes a strong public policy argument for more sweeping re-entry programs. He notes that they dramatically reduce rates of recidivism – of criminals committing crimes and being convicted again. In some places, re-entry programs have decreased recidivism rates by as much as 50 percent.

Surbeck also points out that these programs are much less expensive than traditional incarceration – between 25 percent and 50 percent cheaper, in most cases. They also are a better investment because making it possible for a prisoner to become productive means that he or she then becomes a taxpayer who contributes to the community, rather than someone it costs us between \$40,000 and \$80,000 to imprison.

All of that pales beside the human consideration, Surbeck says. If we have an opportunity to see that lives don't go to waste or see that human beings don't hurt themselves or others, we should take it.

I ask the judge if government should exert moral leadership on this issue by setting goals for federal, state and local offices to hire ex-offenders.

"Yes," he says with a sigh.

For nearly 50 years, most of our talk in this country has been about how we need to get tougher on crime.

It's good to hear that, finally, there are some voices, like Judge Surbeck's, talking about ways to get smarter about how we deal with crime.

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