

Committee approves bill to fund criminal justice programs

BY: Alec Gray

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INDIANAPOLIS – A House committee passed a bill on Monday that would provide \$50 million annually to be used by local governments for community-based rehabilitation programs for criminal offenders.

HB 1006 received support from judges, sheriffs and others throughout the state.

The bill – by Rep. Greg Steuerwald, R-Avon – is a follow up to a sentencing reform law that puts lower level felons in community-based programs instead of sending them to prison. But that law included no funding to boost those programs.

“I think this is absolutely essential,” Steuerwald said. “If we do not do this, (last year’s law) will not be successful and we will place an incredible burden on the locals.”

Sending criminals back into the communities for mental health rehabilitation and other programs will put a burden on communities, local officials said. But Hendricks County Judge Robert Freese said they are ready for it.

“Give us the ability to do the programs that we need to do locally and we’ll get the job done,” Freese said.

Those who testified for the bill said that rehabilitating offenders and cutting down the recidivism rate is important.

Stephen Luce, the executive director of the Indiana Sheriffs Association, said that when offenders do break the law, they shouldn't just get thrown into prison without getting helped.

"We just don't want the jails to be the dumping ground again," Luce said.

The bill requires that 75 percent of the funds given to counties be used for mental health treatment. But some counties say they need money to build and expand prisons and housing for offenders, something that the bill does not allocate.

Allen County does not have suitable housing for offenders that will be sent to them under the new law, according to Beth Lock, Allen County's director of governmental affairs.

"I know there's no discussion today on bricks and mortar and capital costs, but I think we'd be remiss to say that everyone has suitable housing. Sometimes they can't go to their housing. They have nowhere to go except DOC," Lock said.

But David Powell, the executive director of the Indiana Prosecuting Attorneys Council, fears that just building more prisons means the problem of offenders committing future crimes would not be addressed.

"Our goal is to reduce the population, to impact recidivism," Powell said.

The bill passed the committee 10-0.

Alec Gray is a reporter for [TheStatehouseFile.com](http://www.TheStatehouseFile.com)

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