

Jay Quam: How can we help ex-cons thrive outside?

It takes more than the threat of going back behind bars. It takes jobs, support.

By JAY M. QUAM

The article "Release program failure rate: 40%" (Oct. 28) focused on Minnesota's efforts to address the problem of recidivism by concentrating resources on monitoring high-risk offenders. As a district judge and a citizen of Minnesota, I have a professional and personal interest in the success of those efforts.

It is commendable that the Department of Corrections is seeking to concentrate finite supervisory resources on those who present the greatest risk. It is a mistake, however, to think that supervision coupled with the threat of reincarceration is the only answer to reducing recidivism.

There are a number of obstacles that prevent many felons from staying crime-free beyond the lack of adequate supervision. Most are obstacles that no amount of supervision will remove. The most significant include:

- **Lack of the skills needed to succeed on the outside.** Despite occasional references to flat-screen TVs and similar luxuries, prison is not a nice place. By necessary design, it is a hard, dangerous, uncomfortable and highly structured environment.

The skills that an inmate must develop to survive in the harsh prison setting include the ability to be hard, manipulative, intimidating and/or pathologically submissive. Because the inmate's life is so structured, it also eliminates any need to develop the ability to make practical decisions about day-to-day living. In short, the skills that an inmate develops are generally well-suited to criminal behavior.

- **Lack of jobs.** Most felons don't have marketable skills going into prison, and most don't acquire them while there. It's not easy to find a job if you have limited

skills in any economy, let alone when the unemployment rate is at current levels and you carry the stigma of being a convicted felon.

What is a felon to do if he or she can't find a socially acceptable job? If the felon has survived prison, one thing is certain: He (or she) is determined and resourceful enough to survive on the outside, too, in whatever way is necessary -- drug dealing, stealing, exploitation, prostitution or some other criminal activity.

• **Lack of a positive support network.** Many felons leaving prison are estranged from family and have no permanent place to live. They also generally have no support network to help guide them on a path that involves a healthier legal lifestyle than the one that brought them to prison in the first place. Without help to get (and stay) on a better path, the felon often goes back to the only path he knows.

It is a good sign that Minnesota received a \$750,000 grant to bolster programs that provide what those in the corrections community call "re-entry services." These services are designed to help eliminate the obstacles identified above by providing more education, vocational training, mentoring, chemical and mental-health treatment, housing, and employment.

Though an additional \$750,000 may seem like a lot, it is nothing compared with the costs of reincarcerating repeat offenders, let alone the less tangible, but very severe, costs to victims of continued crime.

Let's hope that the state's efforts lead not only to better use of the Department of Correction's supervisory resources, but also to increased awareness of, and funding for, the vital role that re-entry services plays in reducing recidivism.

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