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Recidivism in Utah

American Society for Public Administration - Utah Chapter
by Hillary Galvin, Graduate Assistant, CPPA

This month’s American Society of Public Administration (ASPA) luncheon was held on February 3, 2011. The discussion topic was Recidivism in Utah, specifically in Salt Lake County. The panel featured Rollin Cook, Chief Deputy of the Salt Lake County Sheriff’s Office; Kelly Colopy, Deputy Director of Salt Lake County’s Department of Human Services; and Craig Burr, Director of Programming for the Utah Department of Corrections. All three panelists had specific expertise in the subject of recidivism.

The moderator of the panel, Matt Dumont of the Salt Lake County Sheriff’s Office and past president of the Utah Chapter of ASPA, began the discussion with a startling statistic: in recent years nearly 70% of previously incarcerated individuals return to prison within a year. He then asked the panelists their views about the greatest challenges when dealing with recidivism and what changes they have witnessed over the past decade within their agencies.

Chief Rollin Cook began by discussing changes in the philosophy of the sheriff’s office and the corrections system as a whole, in handling offenders. He stressed that the method of simply “warehousing” criminals is an outdated and impractical approach that has perpetuated recidivism and led to overcrowding. In the past decade, the sheriff’s office has shifted its focus to curbing recidivism through the implementation of rehabilitation programs. These rehabilitation efforts include creating a horticulture program that allows inmates to grow food that can be sold at the local farmer’s market and opportunities to obtain employment outside the correctional facility, with the proceeds from each applied to the cost of incarceration. The sheriff’s department has also created a program to teach inmates necessary life skills like personal finance and CPR that will help them be successful once they re-enter society.

Ms. Kelly Colopy spoke of the increased collaboration between her agency, local law enforcement agencies and the Department of Corrections, specifically in the area of rehabilitation. She discussed several mental health and substance abuse treatment programs that are offered by the Department of Human Services and available to offenders once they are no longer incarcerated. With close to 75% of inmates having documented substance abuse or mental health problems, providing individuals with access to treatment programs is a necessity, which has already shown impressive results. Utah Department of Human Services statistics indicate that recidivism is 32% less likely for individuals who receive regular treatment and 45% less likely for individuals who participate in more intensive, residential treatment programs.

Craig Burr discussed the Department of Corrections’ wide range of programs available to both inmates and corrections officers. The programming department offers two substance abuse treatment programs which include aftercare, various life skills programs and educational opportunities. These programs have had increasing success in the past five years with the rolls in the substance abuse treatment programs growing annually and the number of high school graduates increasing from 634 in 2005 to over 1,000 in 2010. The department has also instituted motivational interviewing training for officers with the objective of building a more interactive relationship between corrections officers and prisoners.

All three panelists agreed that while treatment and support during a prisoner’s stay are important, recidivism is also reduced through continuous support once he or she re-enters the community. They stressed the need for additional services and facilities to help former inmates adjust to life outside of prison. Rollin Cook spoke of a proposal for a “Community Corrections Center” that would allow inmates to transition more gradually from incarceration to freedom. Ms. Colopy also emphasized the need for greater re-entry planning as well as interagency records sharing.

While the cost of recidivism is difficult to estimate, Chief Cook estimates the savings realized from lowering the rate of recidivism at around $3 million. Mr. Burr indicated that each booking costs tax payers $1,700 and there are almost 700 Utahns with 11 to 15 prior bookings. By all accounts it seems that encouraging the creation of methods and programs that reduce recidivism should not only make Utah safer, but also save tax payers a large sum of money.

More information about the programs offered through these agencies can be found at:
As always, ASPA would like to thank Chief Deputy Rollin Cook, Deputy Director Kelly Colopy and Director Craig Burr for joining us and sharing their expertise.

The American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) is the nation's most respected organization representing all forums in the public service arena. The mission of ASPA includes:

- advancing the art, science, teaching, and practice of public and nonprofit administration;
- promoting the value of joining and elevating the public service profession;
- building bridges among all who pursue public purposes;
- providing networking and professional development opportunities;
- and achieving innovative solutions to the challenges of governance.

The Utah Chapter hosts monthly luncheons featuring a wide range of speakers and panels covering interesting and timely topics. Our next luncheon is on January 13, 2010 at noon. The topic will be Succession Planning. Please visit our website at www.cppa.utah.edu/aspa for more information and to make a reservation.