

Prisoner reentry in michigan



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The state of Michigan spends more money on jails and prisons than it does on education, but is this money well spent? The Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative would suggest that it is. The MPRI is a collaborative effort that draws from the commitment of community groups, the Michigan Department of Corrections, and other state agencies. Launched in 2003 and expanded statewide in 2008, the initiative's mission is to equip every released offender with tools to succeed in the community.

The MPRI is a nationally recognized commitment to public safety that gives prisoners the tools they need to succeed in a process that begins when they enter prison and continues through parole and reintegration into the community. The MPRI has effectively reduced Michigan's prison population, recidivism rate, and crime rate. (Figure 1) It has broken the cycle of soaring Corrections costs by investing in safe alternatives to costly and unnecessarily long stays in prisons.

By breaking the cycle of crime and incarceration, the MPRI has managed to cut spending on prisons down by 293 million dollars annually, and although that may be the biggest benefit it is one of many. (1) The number one goal of the MPRI is to reduce crime. It does that by better preparing parolees before they return to the community, making smarter decisions about who is released and when, and providing enhanced supervision and services in the community. It ensures what Lansing Prison Warden Kenneth McKee calls " a game plan for success," which includes a team of supporters from the community who will help them carry out the plan. 1) MPRI begins at intake, when a prisoner's risk, needs and strengths are measured to develop individualized programming. Prior to parole, offenders are transferred to a

reentry facility, and a transition plan, which addresses employment, housing, transportation, mentoring, counseling and any necessary treatment for mental illness or addictions, is finalized in close collaboration with community service providers. After release, officers use firm but flexible graduated sanctions- including short stays in a reentry center if needed-to manage rule breaking before it escalates to more serious transgressions.

All correctional jargon aside, the basic message remains; you can't put offenders back into the situation and lifestyle they came from before prison and expect the outcome to be different. This is where " reentry" comes into play. (2) The MPRI was built in three phases to create seamless transitions back into society. Phase one is the " getting ready" phase. This phase begins the day the prisoner enters the prison. It starts at the reception center with a comprehensive assessment of each prisoner's risk factors, needs and strengths.

A TransitionAccountabilityPlan is formed to determine the services the prisoner will need to prepare them for life after prison. This plan also establishes a set of expectations for the prisoner and how well they adhere to the plan weighs heavily in decisions made by the Parole and Commutation Board. Phase two is the " going home" phase. This phase begins about two months before the prisoners expected release date. During this phase, prisoners identified as needing more intensive preparation and support are transferred to an " in-reach" center, a prison closer to home.

This helps set the stage for a smooth and successful transition. The focus during this phase is also to help the prisoner find work and become " employable" as well as setting up stable housing. Depending on their needs,

prisoners are linked with community services such as substance abuse treatment, mental health services, or sex offender therapy. The conventional role of a parole officer is transformed to a case manager in an effort to help the transition team get a support system in place.

When the parole date arrives the prisoner is armed with a structure and support network in place to help them succeed. Lastly, phase three is called the “staying home” phase. As opposed to a decade ago where parolees were released on a Friday and had a weekend or more to get into trouble before their first meeting with their parole agent, they are now released earlier in the week and they promptly meet with their parole agent and service providers. This first meeting is used to establish job leads, assist with resumes, ensure medical assistance if needed and identify stable housing. 1) This transformation of Michigan’s corrections system has been remarkable, but it did not happen overnight. Over the course of eight years the MPRI has moved from an idea of fixing a broken system to a comprehensive strategy that is changing the nature of prisons. In doing this the MDOC has created many employment opportunities for positions such as parole agents, corrections officers, teachers and case managers. The transformation has also changed the way former prisoners view people in these positions.

Grand Raids police officer Terry Dixon runs a weekly support group for MPRI participants and says that “Many are looking at police officers in a new way, as supporters.” (1) The MPRI is constantly meeting challenges; one of the largest being special needs prisoners. Those include youths, the medically fragile, those with mental health issues and sex offenders. Before the MPRI, says Michigan Parole and Commutation Board Chairwoman Barbara

Sampson, parole board members were reluctant to grant parole to the mentally ill because they knew services were not in place to help them succeed.

Now, she said, the transition accountability plans are designed to ensure a smooth transition to the community. Similarly, she said, effective new treatment programs are in place for sex offenders. (1) The \$56 million spent on the MPRI in fiscal year 2011 is substantial, but it is only a small fraction of the \$2 billion Michigan Department of Corrections budget, and it is paying back dividends in public safety and reducing the prison population.

The rate of parolees returning to prison for new crimes or technical violations is at its lowest level since record keeping began 23 years ago. Even though there are more parolees, the number returning to prison for new crimes fell from 2,020 in 2006 to a projected 1,836 in 2010. Michigan's prison population grew by nearly 500% between 1973 and 2003, consuming a much greater share of tax payer dollars. The number of prisoners has safely declined by almost 7,500 since March of 2007 and is at its lowest level since 1999.

As a result the state has been able to close 14 correctional facilities. (1) It is important to recognize what the MPRI is and what it is not. It is not a magic potion that will eliminate crime. It is also not an early release program. Every parolee has served at least the minimum court imposed sentence. MPRI is a strategy that pulls together the state, the community, police, mentors, therapists, and others to give each returning prisoner a game plan for success.

Former Saint Clair County Community College professor Michael Berro explains the MPRI bottom line as being “ the understanding that the majority of felony offenders will return to our community. We should prepare them for it so they don’t end up back here, spending our tax dollars again. ” (3) Michigan may be spending more money on jails and prisons than it does on education, but consider the effect the MPRI has had on repeat criminal offenses, inmates in prison and the general crime rate. It has successfully managed to lower all three.

When the state’s budget is squeezed by declining tax revenue, and areas of spending are under question, it seems the success of a government funded program couldn’t come at a better time. WORKS SITED 1. Michigan Department of Corrections. (2010). Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative 2010 Progress Report. Lansing: Public Policy Associates, Inc. 2. Wesoloski, E. (2011, April 15). Pew Center Report Lauds Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative. Prisons and Prisoners, p. 1. 3. Berro, M. (2006, March 13). Former Macomb County Parole Supervisor, College Professor. (R. Spangler, Interviewer)