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Study shows program offers prisoners opportunity

By: JO MORELAND - Staff Writer

SAN MARCOS -- A study conducted through the Cal State San Marcos Foundation indicates that prisoners who complete a job-readiness training program are less likely to return to custody than those who don't, according to the agency that runs the program.

It costs the state about \$36,000 a year to hold a prisoner in an overcrowded system with about 172,000 inmates.

The expense for the Prisoner Re-entry Employment Program is about \$4,000 per person annually, according to Second Chance, the San Diego-based nonprofit government consulting organization that operates the rehabilitation program.

The study by the Social and Behavioral Research Institute, a nonprofit organization that does independent research for clients, stated that 70 percent of 101 parolees and probationers who completed the training program stayed out of jail or prison over two years.

"We want to take this level of finding to the state and see the state take a look at this as a role model (for all the prisons)," said Scott Silverman, Second Chance executive director.

However, a spokesman for the California Department of Corrections said this month that comparing the study's findings released last week to a 70 percent return rate to custody at the 33 state prisons wouldn't be accurate.

"I think we would agree with their basic contention that any education and rehabilitation reduces crime," spokesman Bill Sessa said.

Still, Sessa said, there are big differences in the way the state figures the return rate on prisoners and the way the program did for the study.

He said the state has to base its return rates on all of its prisoners, while the Prisoner Re-entry Employment Program study screened its applicants and based its results only on those who actually graduated.

The state return rate also includes parole violators, Sessa said.

Chuck Flacks, a director at the Social and Behavioral Research Institute at Cal State San Marcos, said the study showed that the program could "potentially prevent recidivism,"

the habitual return of many prisoners to jails or prisons.

However, the word "potentially" applies, Flacks said, because the study didn't involve a large number of state prisons and most of the participants were from county jails.

"There's a big difference between the recidivism rate and the return to custody rate," Sessa said. "Without disputing statistics, their main point (rehabilitation) is one that we would agree with."

Silverman said that regardless of the difference between calculating the number of prisoners returned to custody, the three-year study still shows that job-readiness training would reduce crime and potentially save the state millions of dollars.

In addition, he said, placing prisoners in the program as part of their sentencing would still allow for punishment as well as rehabilitation.

"If we're going to punish them, let's give them incentives before they're released, but hold their feet to the fire," Silverman said.

The \$60,000 study was paid for by The California Endowment, a private health foundation.

Flacks said 310 prisoners with release dates that corresponded with the study were placed in the program.

Anyone who didn't follow the Second Chance "tough love" program was kicked out, he said.

"That amount of people not going back to jail or prison was a larger finding than we expected," Flacks noted. "One implication (of the study) is that building more prisons doesn't solve problems."

Of 643 applicants who didn't qualify for the rehabilitation program, he said, 68 percent were rearrested within the study time, based on state records.

The program's solutions ---- providing job-readiness skill training, sober living and mental health counseling ---- paid off, with 83 percent of the graduates getting jobs after the four- to five-week program, Flacks said.

He said the study also increased confidence and motivation among the parolees and probationers, while reducing their depression.

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