Unique Louisiana Plans Aim At Rehabilitating Criminal

In an era when the phrase "crime in the streets" generates real fear in almost every American community, Louisiana has embarked on a unique program aimed at rehabilitating the nonviolent criminal and preventing his return to prisoners that often are only grade schools for crime.

The program sets up "community rehabilitation centers" and the problem it essentially attacks is known as recidivism. Recidivism refers to the reconviction of a person previously convicted of a crime in Louisiana, that is another way of saying that around 67 per cent of all persons sentenced to the state penitentiary at Angola eventually return to prison after they are released.

Package Of Bills

The Community Rehabilitation Centers, which grew out of recommendations sponsored by the Goals for Louisiana program, have been made possible by a package of penal reform legislation authored by Sen. Michael O'Keefe, and others, as the enabling legislation for this bill.

These acts authorize the Department of Corrections to establish, operate and maintain centers for convictions who have a community rehabilitation center for convicts who have a strong rehabilitation potential, based on pre-sentence investigations, reports, tests and recommendations.

Dormitory-style facilities, without guards or bars, the centers are designed to be self-supporting and, in fact, to save the state money. Inmates will return to their old jobs, or be found new ones, and will actually pay for their own upkeep with a portion of their salaries going to pay for room, board, and counseling services.

In addition, many persons awaiting trial who are unable to afford bail can be released to such a community rehabilitation center. The legislation also allows a parole board to impose on a parolee the provision that he live at a community rehabilitation center, thereby creating an alternative half-step between complete incarceration and the full freedoms of parole. It is also envisioned that many will be able to support their families as well, making it unnecessary for the state to support them through welfare.

One such center, the Community Correction and Research Center in Baton Rouge, has already become a reality. Designed to handle offenders in the types of 17 and 23, it has been set up by the East Baton Rouge City - Parish government and the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Criminal Justice.

Barracks-Type

A barracks-type building, the center has testing, recreation, dining and training facilities. Also participating in this innovative project are law enforcement agencies, Southern University, LSU, the Department of Hospitals, the Department of Corrections, the State Department of Education, and the AFL-CIO, as well as many civic-minded citizens from throughout the East Baton Rouge area.

Pilot Study

Of special significance is the fact that the center is a one-of-a-kind project in the U.S. It is being looked to from across the country as a pilot study, both in its make-up and in view of the actual rehabilitation research being done on the premises. According to Neil LaMont, Executive Director of the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Criminal Justice, "This important program is designed to provide an acceptable alternative to incarceration and to maintain the errant individual's link to his society and establish that society's recognition of their role and responsibility in rehabilitation."

In addition, the governor, by Executive Order 77, has set up the Committee on Correctional Treatment and rehabilitation to advise him on the implementation of the above acts. The committee, chaired by O'Keefe with State Supreme Court Justice Albert Tate, Orleans Criminal Court Judge Israel M. Augustine Jr., Sheriff John St. Amant of St. Charles Parish and John Bourg Sr. of the Louisiana AFL-CIO, is presently meeting and working on the creation of another community rehabilitation center in the New Orleans area to further implement the goals and corresponding acts.

"Full implementation will take more than legislation," O'Keefe said. "It will take continued citizen interest and understanding of the problems of crime and criminals, as well as a genuine desire to help solve these problems in the best way we know - Rehabilitation."

These programs were among many cited this week in a report on implementation of Goals for Louisiana released by the Council on Governmental Reorganization.

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