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Changing incarceration culture

DOC leaders visit SSRJ to view Community Model Program up close

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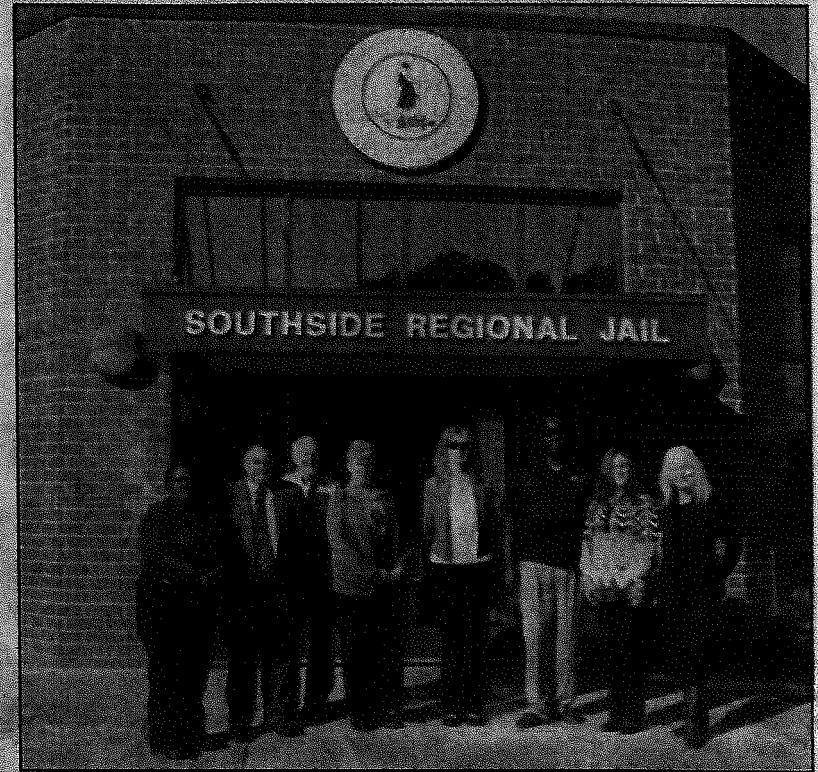
The Community Model in Corrections program at Southside Regional Jail is changing the culture of incarceration so everyone involved in the program were happy for a chance to show Department of Corrections Assistant Director Dave Robinson and Program Director Scott Richeson the program up close and personal.

Director Harold Clarke was supposed to tour the jail also but could not make it. Robinson and Richeson met with Col. Karen Craig as well as Morgan Moss and Penny Patton, co-founders of the Center for Therapeutic Justice along with Michael McBride and Katherine Anderson. They were taken on a tour of the jail by Capt. Angela Smith.

Moss said the purpose of having the DOC representatives visit was to experience what the inmates participating experience in the Community Model in Corrections Program.

No other program has had the success that this program has had, stressed Moss. The national average of recidivism is about 50 percent, but amazingly, at SSRJ, the rate has been only 14 percent during the last 14 years. Robinson and Richeson seemed impressed with the rate and wanted to know more about the successful program.

It costs taxpayers a fortune to



Teresa Welsh/Independent-Messenger
Capt. Angela Smith, Dave Robinson, Morgan Moss, Col. Karen Craig, Scott Richeson, Michael McBride, Katherine Anderson and Penny Patton stand in front of the jail before a tour of the jail and the Community Model in Corrections program.

keep someone incarcerated but this program has given the inmates hope for a better life but first they have to learn the skills they need to make it on their own after being released. In this program, the inmates give themselves and each other a far bet-

ter chance of not being locked up from the outside world again than they would have had without the program. The inmates solve their own problems, stressed Craig.

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She is 100 percent behind the program. In fact, Craig says the program fits her mission to have inmates return better than when he or she entered the jail. When she learned that SSRJ had the program five years ago when she was hired, "it brought tears to my eyes," said Craig. She praised the program, staff and inmates for all of their hard work.

Currently, there is 10 women and 23 men of the 156 inmates at the jail who are part of the Community Model in Corrections.

The group talked about the grant that got the program started and how challenging it has been to find the money to keep the program going, but thanks to District 19, Emporia, Greensville County and SSRJ, the program has survived although funding for the program dried up.

Don't think that it doesn't matter what these inmates go through while in jail, Moss said. "Most people never see what goes on behind bars. It's not pretty." About 20 percent have mental issues and another 60-70 percent have addiction issues. So about three-fourths of inmates have one or both of these problems to deal with. "So what happens to a person when they are locked away in a cage? It doesn't do anything for them," Moss said.

tion," he said, noting that about 100-120 people a year have changed their lives taking this program while incarcerated. "There is no us versus them, which is a major problem in the world now," Moss said.

Patton said the inmates are responsible for their own success or failure. "We are not their voice. They do the talking. They figure out what to do for themselves. It's up to them to make progress. We just have to believe in them," she said, noting that if an inmate has a problem they say "take it to the community" and everyone sits around in a circle together to discuss and find a solution to the problem.

Moss said that Emporia-Greenville is lucky to have a jail that even offers any kind of program to inmates, especially one that is a model to all the other prisons in all the other states. Only the local regional jail has started a program that has actually made a difference in so many lives.

Inmates have real issues and it ends in incarceration but this program has turned their lives around 180 degrees. The program makes the inmates take a long, hard look at themselves and they learn from each other, he said.

A lot of problems faced by inmates are addressed by the Community Model,

them and it changes their character, Moss stressed.

The Community Model is a Re-Entry Program of the Community Model Association of America, a nonprofit 501(c) (3) dedicated to bring the Community Model into the U.S. criminal justice system as a human service to reduce recidivism by changing the culture of incarceration.

The Community Model program begins with support from the jail administration and an invitation to all those incarcerated to join. Those who volunteer to participate move to a designated living unit within the institution.

Specific activities, supplemented by the best multi-media and written resources available for this population, encouraging candid and honest dialogue among peers, are scheduled for 12 hours a day within this 24/7 designated living unit, Moss said.

Together they assume responsibility for their personal outcomes, learn new tools for communication, behavior, and changing themselves internally -- essentially "re-parenting" themselves. Their work is done sitting in a circle and in small groups led by volunteer inmate mentors.

Participant-led commu-

nity meetings deal with deconstructive and constructive behavior, addressing matters of civility, recovery from addictive behaviors, and self-limiting beliefs.

The sense of belonging, contribution, empowerment, and equality in this well-established process leads to higher levels of ownership, motivation, participation, positive attitude, and hard work as the community constantly builds and matures, he said.

The institution and correctional staff benefit from an unparalleled enhancement of the safe and orderly operation of their facility, Craig pointed out.

This model costs approximately one-fourth of traditional treatment, is open to all inmates, and reduces the recidivism rate from 50 to 14 percent...considered among the highest positive results in the nation.

The Model was initially funded through a 2005 Federal Grant and then by joint funding from District 19 Community Services Board, local funding and Southside Regional Jail non tax-payers funds. Due to budget cuts, these funds are no longer available.

For more information or to make a tax deductible contribution visit: www.communitymodel.org.

Not everyone has the same chances that most of us get. The environment in jail is bad, it's very bad, but so is the environment that most of these prisoners were brought up in, he said. "You learn from your environment and culture," Moss said.

"If you grew up in the same culture, abusive environment, went through the same things some of these people have... where would you be today? Where would we all be?" he asked. But the inmates find ways of solving their own problems and it has brought about a new culture in their pod, he said. The inmates treat each other with respect, kindness and express concern for each other.

Moss said that sitting with the inmates in this program, which are not housed with the rest of the population, he is amazed at how much the inmates help not only themselves but the others in the group that also want a better life when they are no longer behind bars.

It's amazing to see the inmates suddenly start treating each other with dignity and respect. "This changes the culture of incarcera-

which is run by the inmates themselves. They have learned that they have to be respectful and show respect. In the past nine years at nine jails offering the program, there is probably been less than nine incidents reported. Rarely do the inmates get to fighting. "This is not true of any of the other model programs that have been tried. This program is the one exception," Moss said.

People think that they want to inmates to work hard but in reality they are still locked up but with a program at SSRJ inmates are part of something bigger than themselves. For many of the inmates it is the first time they have had a chance to actually be part of something constructive. They have to solve their own programs, find their own answers and learn the skills they need to make it on their own.

The inmates are challenged to learn to grow and deal with many issues, the ones that they didn't deal with earlier in life that landed them in jail. In the classes, inmates debate different view points. They aren't told what to think but instead learn what works for

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