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## Experts describe barriers to ex-inmates' success after prison

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(Published: June 1, 2006)

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) - More than one-third of inmates released from state prison wind up back behind bars, and experts say the recidivism rate is partly because of joblessness, homelessness and other barriers that preclude ex-cons' re-entry into society.

Experts from the state Office of the Public Defender, the Corrections Department and the Parole Board appeared before an Assembly regulatory panel Thursday to describe a litany of difficulties released inmates face. The problems range from drug and alcohol addictions and lack of formal education to broken bonds with family to the inability to get a job.

Few companies are willing to hire ex-convicts, said Yvonne Smith Segars, a state public defender. "They're forever discriminated against, that's the harsh reality."

Some of the problems have seemingly simple fixes, such as when a released inmate doesn't have a Social Security card or photo ID, which makes getting a job or obtaining social services nearly impossible.

Other problems are more vexing, such as trying to eliminate the lag time for mental health services between when an inmate is released and his eligibility on the outside kicks in.

"Prisoners are told to reform, but they are given few tools to do so," said John D'Amico Jr., a retired Superior Court judge and chairman of the state Parole Board. "Once they are entangled in the prison system, many belong to it for life. They may spend stretches of time inside prison and periods outside, but they are never truly free."

Leah Kaiser, director of the Corrections Department's Office of Transitional Services, said all prisoners are given prerelease counseling, but the extent of the service depends on where they are imprisoned and what their needs are. At a minimum, they're surveyed; at most, they get intensive case management and transitional living services.

Asked how the state budget crisis could affect transitional services, Kaiser said she focuses sparse resources on proven programs.

D'Amico acknowledged that the problems facing men and women as they leave prison are not new. But with 14,000 inmates to be released from New Jersey prisons this year, he said there is a renewed commitment to fixing the problems.

"There is a national consensus that we can no longer afford to build new prisons," he said. "People are realizing we can't afford to spend money on prisons as opposed to re-entry programs."

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