



## KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

### **Prisoner re-entry pilot could save money, lives**

Tuesday, August 29, 2006

This society sends a mixed message to people being released from prison after paying their debt to society: Get a job, but not in a nursing home or a school or with the state corrections department and, if you're a sex offender, nowhere near schools or day care centers.

Paroled felons have never had an easy time finding jobs and re-entering society successfully. But Michigan's bleak employment picture, coupled with a pile of restrictions the Legislature has heaped on parolees over the last decade or so, has made it tougher than ever for those who have paid their debt to become law-abiding, job-holding citizens.

In Michigan, where some 13,000 prisoners are released each year, about half will return to prison within two years.

But the state is piloting a program, the Michigan Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative, to help parolees overcome the obstacles to successful reintegration into society. The program includes substance abuse treatment, help finding housing, jobs, transportation and legal identification. In Kalamazoo County, one of eight MPRI pilot locations, about 90 former prisoners have gone through the program between October 2005 and the middle of this month. Only six have been returned to prison.

According to the state corrections department, it costs taxpayers \$117 million a year to incarcerate repeat offenders. This fiscal year, the state will spend \$12 million on the pilot program, in which 1,330 parolees have voluntarily participated.

It is the intent of state officials to expand the program to all state prisoners eventually.

And we anticipate that doing so could end up saving taxpayers a significant amount of money.

Yet even more important, if the MPRI is successful, it could help keep ex-cons from squandering their lives behind bars and help them become productive, contributing members of society.

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