

Select Media Coverage

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Busloads protest plan to expand jail

Chip Johnson, Chronicle Columnist

September 6, 2012



James Hall of Bi Bett Corp Diablo Valley Ranch and Paula Kent of Anka discuss the proposed expansion of the Contra Costa County jail in Richmond. Activists want services, not incarceration. Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle / SF

(09-06) 17:00 PDT MARTINEZ -- The very idea that Contra Costa County residents would support a \$6 million county jail expansion with funds from a state law mandating counties to provide alternatives to incarceration was met with stiff opposition at a meeting Thursday in Martinez.

Three busloads of it, to be exact.

Activists from Richmond and elsewhere on the western side of the county packed a hearing room in a county building to defeat a proposal from Sheriff David Livingston to add 150 beds to the West Contra Costa County Detention Facility in Richmond, which already houses more than 1,000 male and female inmates.

The forces aligned against the jail expansion plan were so overwhelming that Livingston's proposal never even made it to a vote of the Community Corrections Partnership, the county entity set up to recommend how to spend the money that Sacramento is giving to local governments in exchange for transferring thousands of inmates from state prisons to the counties.

Livingston capitulated when the talk turned to creating a new committee - and another layer of bureaucracy - to guide the planning process.

"Let's hold on the expansion if it helps to move the discussion forward," Livingston suggested.

Activists holding signs and wearing stickers saying "Invest in people not prisons" were joined by clergy members and officeholders past and present, including former state Assemblywoman Loni Hancock and Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin.

Livingston is a member of the Community Corrections Partnership. The panel also includes representatives of the courts, the district attorney and public defender's offices, and the county probation and health departments. Richmond Police Chief Chris Magnus also serves on the panel.

The committee has been given a \$19 million state grant to build a government and community-based network that can provide comprehensive rehabilitative services to probationers and parolees released back into the community.

The nation's prisons and jails have become institutions of higher criminal learning. Rehabilitation and reform just aren't part of the program, if they ever were. So any plan that keeps violent offenders locked up and provides nonviolent offenders with an opportunity to aid in their own rehabilitation is a better plan than what we have now.

Not much support

Although Livingston reserved the right to reintroduce the jail expansion plan at a later date, it appeared support would be hard to come by in the Community Corrections Partnership, and nonexistent in the community.

It was a significant turnaround for anti-jail-expansion activists, who said the sheriff's plan appeared to be a done deal a little more than two months earlier.

Activists said Thursday's decision was a victory for efforts like the Safe Return Project in Richmond, which employs recently released probationers and parolees as community organizers and researchers. Without a jail construction project, more money will be available for such groups.

Alternatives to jail

Adam Kruggel, who heads the Contra Costa Interfaith Support Community Organization, credited such efforts with reducing the rate of homicides and injury shootings in Richmond by nearly 50 percent in the past nine months.

He noted that the county reserves 140 beds in the Richmond lockup for the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency to house suspected illegal immigrants. Taking back those beds would be one way to provide for any influx of county inmates, he said.

If the realignment money that the state is giving to counties goes for providing jobs, housing, health and education services, it won't be necessary to build a bigger jail, Kruggel said.

"I think ultimately the issue here is, what kind of community do we want to have?" said the Rev. Kamal Hassan, pastor at Sojourner Truth Presbyterian Church in Richmond.

"If we want a community where people can grow, be rehabilitated, welcomed back and go on to lead productive lives," Hassan said, "incarceration does not get us there."

Chip Johnson's column appears in The San Francisco Chronicle on Tuesday and Friday. E-mail: chjohnson@sfgate.com

Once behind bars, group advocates for prisoners coming home

Richmond Confidential

By [Julie Brown](#), October 19, 2012



Tamisha Walker is a founding member of the Safe Return Project. A formerly incarcerated woman, Walker is now a full-time student and advocates for those coming out of jail. (Photo by: Julie Brown)

When the door opened at West County Detention Facility for Tamisha Walker, it was dark. After six months in jail, Walker was free. But she was alone. No one was there to pick her up. All she had was a bus ticket and a bag.

“You just get on a bus,” Walker said. “And it’s a long, lonely ride.”

Jeff Rutland knows the lonely freedom Walker spoke of. He’s reminded of it every time he sees a released inmate walk down MacDonald Avenue from the Richmond BART station in a gray sweatsuit with a paper bag. He once walked that same path.

“You see that look,” Rutland said. “I know the struggles and hardships they face.”

Which is why two years ago last month Rutland and Walker brought their experience to the just-started Safe Return Project to help people coming out of jail or prison.

“We are the voice at the table,” Rutland said. “Not only for the reentry community, but for the community at large.”

Rutland and Walker are success stories. Both are employed and motivated. Walker, a mother of two and engaged, is a full-time student with aspirations to get her Ph.D in psychology and work with broken families and young people of color. You’ll find Rutland riding his bicycle around town, gardening with Urban Tilth or sitting behind a computer in county meetings. To get here, though, they both had a long walk uphill.

Walker counts her blessings — two sons who keep her accountable, a place to live and a job. Alcohol played a big role in putting her behind bars; so she put herself into an alcohol recovery program. It took her six months to get her youngest son, Irra Bradley-Prayer, 5, back. Another six months passed before she got custody of her oldest son, Youmani Mapp, 15.

After serving a seven-year sentence in San Quentin for a strong-arm robbery that he says was motivated by a drug addiction, Rutland rode a Golden Gate Transit bus to the Richmond BART station. His belongings included the same gray sweatsuit, \$120 in his pocket, and a brown paper bag stuffed with some letters and papers, and personal hygiene products.

“I couldn’t tell you where that paper bag is now, but it was the most important thing in the world leaving that prison,” he said.

Rutland spent that Friday night at the Richmond Rescue Mission. He had a weekend to spend before he met with his parole officer on Monday. So he wandered the streets of Richmond. He knew where he shouldn’t go — to the old friends and familiar places that would surely tempt him back to dirty habits. And the places he wanted to go — to see a movie, check into a clean hotel room — he didn’t have the money for.

“I stayed out of the way,” Rutland said. “The first three days, that was rough.”

So many people, Rutland continued, when they get out of prison, they don’t have options and they don’t know what to do. So they fall back.

“It was scary to try to do the right thing, but not know how to do it,” Rutland said. He looked for service providers in Richmond to help him with housing and job searching. But everything at

that time catered to the homeless or the drug addicts, Rutland said, not someone coming home from jail and needing skills to get back on their feet. So Rutland ended up in Oakland at the Volunteers of America shelter. “I just hung on,” he said.

Today, two years since Rutland was released from prison, the services for prisoners coming home are better in Richmond, Rutland said. But they still have “a very long ways to go.”

Some of those gains, though, are attributable to Safe Return. The group pushed the city to eliminate a question on employment applications regarding a criminal record and conducted a revealing survey among those on parole or probation about what prisoners faced coming home. Safe Return members met individually with Richmond residents and leaders to hear their stories and concerns. And they’ve attended many meetings on the city and county level as advocates for the incarcerated.

“It makes better policy when people who have been directly affected by the issues are at the table,” said Eli Moore, a program director with the Pacific Institute, which started the Safe Return Project two years ago with Richard Boyed of Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization and Devone Boggan of the Office of Neighborhood Safety.

Before the Safe Return Project, when Contra Costa County and Richmond were discussing prisoners coming home and developing a strategic plan to better serve the incarcerated, the critical voice of someone who knew reentry firsthand was noticeably absent.

“The idea came from a fundamental recognition,” said Adam Kruggel, executive director of CCISCO. “We were unequipped to understand the challenges that people coming home face.”

After receiving a grant from the California Endowment, the group put out a job announcement specifically seeking those who had spent time in jail — a curious posting that caught the eyes of Rutland, Walker, and a handful of others. Rutland was just a month out of prison when he responded to the ad. He filled out the application because he was ready to make a change. But he surely didn’t imagine himself sitting in boardrooms two years later with the district attorney, the sheriff, and the chief of police talking about prison policy.

“I don’t think anybody knew what would happen,” he said. “But it moved forward.”

Clarence Ford was the youngest person at a September basement meeting at the Richmond Civic Center, but that didn’t stop him from speaking up. Officials were discussing the five stages of arrest, incarceration and reentry, and the 24-year-old wanted to make sure that an education component was included to help offenders understand the judicial process. He was speaking from personal experience.

“It’s like a foreign language,” he told the room.

Ford is one of the newest members on the Safe Return Project. He went to jail when he was 20 and got out a year ago. With the support of his mother, Ford is a full-time student. Going to jail, he said, gave him time to sort out his values and see who he wants to be. He joined the Safe

Return team because he shares their goals, such as a one-stop center for people coming home to help with job training, housing, and other needs. But he also wants to make sure the younger voice is represented.

“If I’m not there, then things are going to continue to be the way they’ve always been,” Ford said.

Looking ahead, the Safe Return Project has big plans. Eventually, the group wants to become independent from its parent organizations, CCISCO and the Pacific Institute. Walker and Rutland said they would like to create a support group for formerly incarcerated people that will not only be a platform to support each other emotionally, but with networking and education. They also see the need for a service providers meeting, a round table where people coming home can leave with someone’s business card to call. And they want to expand their Ban the Box campaign to the county, and then the state, Walker said.

The initiatives the Safe Return Project commits to run on a philosophy of restorative justice. The group’s members, each of who has committed a serious crime, served their sentences and want to change. They hope to heal the community and give back. And at the same, help themselves.

“They’re coming back to their community and trying to make things right,” Kruggel said. “They’re very honest and forthcoming about the mistakes they’ve made in the past and are very committed to their communities to make things right. I think that’s the heart and soul of restorative justice.”

Richmond to ease hiring of ex-criminals

By Hannah Dreier
Oakland Tribune
11/08/2011

When Jeff Rutland was released from San Quentin last year, he became a job search expert.

But he also came to know the chill that would descend over interviews when he explained why he hadn't filled out the section of his application that asked about criminal history.

"Once they found out I had been convicted of a felony, it was like the whole demeanor of the interview just changed," he said.

Spurred by stories like Rutland's, and bracing for an influx of parolees under a new state law, Richmond is quietly changing its hiring practices to make it easier for former offenders to get city jobs.

Starting this month, the city's application form will no longer feature a check-off box asking if the applicant has ever been convicted of a crime.

"We don't want people going back to jail because they have no options," said Councilwoman Jovanka Beckles, who advocated for the change. "But you see that box, and most people think they're already out of the race."

Departments that require a full background check, such as public safety, recreation and paratransit, will ask applicants about prior convictions in a secondary application.

"Ban the box" advocates said the change is essential to help convicts reintegrate into society.

Felons released in Contra Costa County have a 75 percent chance of winding up back behind bars within three years, according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

"Studies have found employment to have a major impact on recidivism," said Eli Moore, of the Pacific Institute, "and this change would pretty obviously increase employment opportunities."

A Pacific Institute survey found a 78 percent unemployment rate among West Contra Costa parolees.

When Rutland, 48, returned to Richmond after serving seven years for strong-arm robbery, he vowed to make a break with his life of crime and prison stints.

At first, he wrote "will explain" next to questions about prior convictions, but eventually, he concluded that many employers had blanket hiring bans for former convicts.

"Some of these jobs, you know they're not even going to mess with you," he said. "It was disheartening."

Rutland finally landed two part-time jobs with local nonprofits, but he worries about returning to the job market.

"I wouldn't put (convicted Ponzi scheme operator Bernie) Madoff in charge of the money. I get that part," he said. "But even with Madoff, couldn't he be a janitor at somebody's company? If we've already served our time, why are you still punishing us?"

California's prison realignment plan, which will send many offenders who would otherwise have been behind bars back to the streets, has lent the problem of recidivism new urgency.

Contra Costa County's Re-entry Strategic Plan, issued last spring, recommended removing criminal history from county job applications, but supervisors have so far declined to make the change.

Oakland, Berkeley, San Francisco, East Palo Alto and Alameda County have all taken steps to ban the box.

Rutland hopes the state will eventually bestow a "protected class" status on former offenders for job and housing applications.

For now, Beckles and other advocates are asking Richmond employers to voluntarily follow the city's lead in removing the checkoff box.

A 2009 Pacific Institute report found that Richmond's top private sector employers ask about prior convictions.

As the city prepares to send its revised application form to the printer, Beckles anticipates some backlash among residents looking to preserve the advantage their clean criminal record gives them in a town with 16 percent unemployment.

"With jobs being limited, some people see this as a competition," she said, "but that's not the case.

"If we believe in second chances, if we believe in rehabilitation, we're all going to be in this together."

Who will help ex-cons in Richmond?

Published: November 2, 2011

Healthy Cal

By Julia Landau

Richmond has the lowest per capita income in the Bay Area and one of the highest unemployment rates. The city is also home to one of the biggest populations of people newly released from prison in Contra Costa County.

Ex-cons already vie for services with other needy people in the city, and more ex-offenders are expected in Richmond as a new law rolls out.

Assembly Bill 109, or prison realignment, is the biggest change in the criminal justice system in decades. This legislation puts low-level felons and parole violators in county jail instead of state prison. Upwards of 90% of these "non-serious" offenders getting transferred to county jails will return to their neighborhoods within the year.

The legislation puts in sharp focus alternatives to incarceration, and the assumption that local communities have more at stake than prisons when it comes to rehabilitation.

Contra Costa County has developed a plan for realignment. But in the city of Richmond, who will take the lead in helping the formerly incarcerated?

County officials say they support local programs, but county and local figures don't enjoy the closest communications, and the law passed in July, leaving little time for debate or lengthy public discussions about how, exactly, resources would be allocated to the cities.

The city, in turn, has taken the issue of realignment to the public and to community based organizations. Richmond residents met with Mayor Gayle McLaughlin and Police Captain Mark Gagan in October to discuss details of realignment.

Captain Gagan, a former social worker, helped to spearhead a relatively new policing strategy in Richmond, one that opens the department to collaboration with citizen groups to prevent violence.

Now, there is a vital need for programs that focus on helping formerly incarcerated residents successfully reintegrate into society, a job historically ill-suited for police, Gagan said.

"I recognize the limits of my uniform," said Gagan. "I see this [realignment law] as a call to action for nonprofits. People who have street credentials, and people who are from the same community as people getting out, these are the people who need to reach out."

Tamisha Walker of the Safe Return Team has just such credentials. At the meeting, she said that some outreach is already underway, but Richmond lacks a central facility to connect returning residents with the services they need.

The Safe Return Team, an arm of the nonprofit research group Pacific Institute, has experience in readjusting to city life after prison terms. This background earns them the trust of recently released parolees, who they interview to learn about what ex-prisoners most need to stay straight.

A shakeup of local reentry services is long overdue, said Walker. She said Richmond needs a transitional housing program that ties new probationers into city services.

"You have to have the right structure for people to open up and say what they need," said Walker. "We have services here in Richmond, it's just that they're not specifically geared toward reentry."

A "one-stop shop" is the biggest missing link in the chain connecting county health and social services with grassroots and nonprofit organizations, advocates say.

Mayor McLaughlin addressed the one-stop shop at the meeting. "There are so many foreclosed homes and empty properties," she said. "It would take some of you to come forward and say you'd allow a place in your neighborhood for formerly incarcerated people to meet."

But neighborly impulses wane when it comes to specific locations. Tension surfaced between the need for a law enforcement presence, to deter crime on the spot, and community engagement in helping people coming back from prison start over.

Residents at the meeting insisted they want programs to help ex-cons get a new start, but worried about insufficient police presence around a one-stop shop for services.

Police, politicians, and health workers agree, Gagan said, on the need for a centralized hub for reentry services, but no formal plan yet exists.

But who will supply the funding for a hub in the hardest-hit places, like Richmond? And will such a place win the support of the broader community?

Times are already tough. Nonprofits that got funding from the public sector have taken a hit during the recession while the numbers they serve increase. Activist churches, grassroots organizations, and political associations have developed programs to help the poor. Fledgling projects must vie for private grants and compete for a small pot of available money from the county.

Contra Costa County's Sheriff, Probation, and Health Services Departments will divvy up the bulk of the \$4.5 million realignment fund, with over half going to new staffing of jails and courts, and a fifth towards an increase in mental health and social services.

Partly due to the state's budget crisis, and partly due to the disjointed agency coordination around the parolee population, law enforcement finds itself in new territory, said Chief Probation Officer Phil Kader.

Rehabilitation programs are part of the realignment package, said Kader, who is overseeing realignment for Contra Costa County. Kader said that probation officers will "act as caseworkers" for the clients they supervise, and the Chief hopes to hire consultants from groups that work inside prisons to prepare people for reentry who are up for release.

But the funding dedicated to programs for ex-prisoners themselves — prep courses for the GED and anger management counseling — must also cover new training for probation officers, whose duties will expand into social work territory, according to a recently released plan by the Community Corrections Partnership, the realignment planning group.

Recently, Kader invited local groups to the meetings of the Community Corrections Partnership, opening the lines to the experience and recommendations of people who work on the ground with the reentry population.

"We are trying to do everything we can with the limited resources [the state] is giving," said Kader.

With AB 109 funding already dedicated, nonprofit organizations that need additional money will have to appeal for federal grants or funds from the private sector, but the meetings could provide a forum for new professional alliances to form between county agencies and local activists.

They could also be a chance for Richmond's advocates to lobby for a greater share of future realignment funding than say, relatively serene Walnut Creek.

Most residents of Richmond, with its high arrest and incarceration rate, know about the “revolving door” of prison – the cycle of young men disappearing from communities and reappearing on parole, as they get older.

A spate of territorial gun violence broke out in the city this summer, with 12 homicides in July and August alone, prompting the creation of a gang task force.

Richmond communities have for years sought means of “interrupting” this cycle, a term used by violence prevention initiatives around the country. They include mentor associations in high schools with violence problems, neighborhood conciliators like the Office of Neighborhood Safety, and community-based policing.

The current approach is a mixture. Cops and state parole agents work in tandem with Richmond’s Office of Neighborhood Safety (ONS), a non-police agency modeled on the Ceasefire, a program in Chicago and Boston aimed at preventing retaliatory violence. According to an ONS report, they try to “engage and stave off the city’s 60-80 most likely shooters and/or most likely to be shot.”

These interventions can help, but many say the most important work is done inside prisons, before the drama of street life has a chance to interfere, and through reentry programs that match up returning individuals with opportunities.

Jeff Rutland, 48, was born and raised in Richmond. He was released from prison in 2010 after serving time on a robbery charge.

Seeing no options in Richmond, he went to the nearest housing program specifically for parolees, Volunteers of America (VOA) in Oakland, which contracts with the state parole agency to provide transitional housing for parolees. VOA recently announced it could no longer support Richmond residents, who sometimes outnumbered those from Oakland.

At VOA, Rutland said, he went on job interviews, reported home by curfew, and banked 60 percent of each new paycheck once he was employed.

Along with Tamisha Walker and three others, Rutland works as a researcher for the Pacific Institute’s Safe Return Team, and as a mentor at Urban Tilth, a local organic farming group.

Rutland is skeptical that a shift in the criminal justice delivery system will do anything to help Richmond’s problems, which he thinks have more to do with poverty and joblessness than with crime per se.

“They’ve tried this before,” he said. “When I first went to prison in 1983, you did your time in the county. Instead of saying the system is broken, they’re trying to patch it up.”

While he acknowledged that San Quentin had some meaningful, volunteer-run services for prisoners still inside, most incarcerated people return home feeling cut-off without options, and branded as a criminal.

“Why is it we can always find the money to lock people up, but we can’t find the money for these reentry and pre-release services?” said Rutland. “The funds are dried up when you want to employ a former prisoner, or train him.”