Maricopa County Board of Supervisors

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June 18, 2013

Maricopa County pursues both incarceration and treatment for inmates;

Aims at enhanced public safety, better society

Contrary to the impressions of some, Maricopa County's jail and criminal justice system is "quite advanced" and one of the more innovative administrations in the nation, according to a top jail administrator and scholar.

And it can get better with the continued implementation of a research-based business model designed to change behaviors and reduce recidivism.

Dr. Gary E. Christensen told the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors Monday that, "if applied properly, these measures will enhance long-term public safety." He told the board the county has several excellent programs but needs to make sure the right offenders receive them. "We are going to tie them together, connect the dots. Our goal is to reduce the number of those who are released in the community, re-offend and come back," Christensen said.

The presentation was part of a "top-to-bottom review" of the county's criminal justice system outlined earlier this year by Board Chairman Andy Kunasek. "Of our county budget, a little over half of it goes to the jail, criminal justice and court system," County Manager Tom Manos said.

The initiative received the backing of both County Attorney Bill Montgomery and Chief Deputy Jerry Sheridan of the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office. "Sheriff Arpaio's philosophy is that a jail is first a place for punishment, but he also believes that offenders can be rehabilitated, especially those entering the system for the first time." Sheridan said that about 120,000 inmates are booked each year into the county jail system and that several core and elective programs are available. He specifically mentioned the MCSO Alpha Program for drug offenders, which is well regarded nationally.

Montgomery said his office is "a ready and willing partner" in more closely assessing the jail population for diversion, treatment and incarceration plans.

Christensen said that by applying careful research on programs and outcomes, evidence-based practices have moved beyond philosophical arguments that pitted sanctions against interventions. "We need to use both," he said.

Christensen cautioned against intensive programming for low-risk offenders. These can be counterproductive by mixing low risk inmates with tougher offenders. “Higher-risk offenders gobble up the low-risk offenders. The low-risk offenders learn things from the higher-risk offenders. It just doesn’t work.”

Richard Beserra, who was incarcerated in 2007, is a graduate of the Alpha Program and is now a senior psychology student at New Mexico State University. He said many of those incarcerated don’t know much about the treatment programs. “A lot of them don’t think they can make it” on the outside.

Beserra said the programs he pursued at the county jail helped him continue his schooling. “Knowing what’s available is critical,” Beserra said. “You folks are taking the right steps.”

Board members endorsed the changes if they can reduce new crimes. Kunasek said these evidence-based policies are part of a long-range criminal justice program that built new jail facilities and courts but aim at a safer and better society.

Supervisor Clint Hickman stressed the need for vocational training and job readiness for the inmates. “Those are the skills they need. Those who can go back to work have a better chance not to recidivate,” Hickman said.

Supervisor Mary Rose Wilcox said she sees “a silent revolution” occurring within the county, with greater cooperation, greater research and bringing case management into the criminal justice system.

Supervisor Steve Chucri said he was encouraged that the plan “balanced” the need for treatment and training programs without being “soft on crime.” “We have a well run county and many good, innovative programs, but we need this kind of constant review to make sure they are being used appropriately and efficiently,” Chucri said.

Christensen is a long-time jail administrator, researcher and consultant who has examined the role jails can play in reducing crime. In 2007, he was named the national “Jail Administrator of the Year” by the American Jail Association. He is currently on contract with Maricopa County to advise on its recidivism reducing strategies.