



Editorial

End the abuses, not effectiveness, of parolee program

A new state audit and the Department of Corrections have uncovered what could amount to millions of dollars of questionable spending in the touted Michigan Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative. Corrections must act now to correct problems, due largely to a lack of oversight on the more than \$33-million program, without undermining its essential mission.

This vital and effective program is too important to the state's overall corrections reforms efforts to be compromised, or even scrapped, by a governor who is rightfully intolerant of waste.

Most MPRI programs and agencies continue to work effectively and responsibly, but a few bad examples can put everyone on guard. In Wayne County, contract agencies were paid multiple bonuses of up to \$1,000 each for finding parolees jobs —

and then received added bonuses when each parolee stayed employed, MDOC reports.

Wayne County agencies were paid slightly more last year for their own bonuses than the amount paid in wage subsidies to employers hiring parolees. If true, that's unconscionable. United Way for Southeastern Michigan, as the local administrator, also paid agencies bonuses for housing and mentoring services.

In another case cited by the department, a Wayne County agency spent \$1,410 a month for parolee rent payments. Now the department is considering paying local agencies the standard rates for housing provided by the Michigan State Housing Development Authority. Other

IT'S COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE TO PUNISH EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS BECAUSE A FEW AGENCIES ACTED INAPPROPRIATELY.

inappropriate payments included spending program money on golf outings for agency staff.

The State Budget Office released the internal audit on Feb. 22.

Clearer guidelines in order

Russ Marlan, administrator of MDOC's executive bureau, said the department would set clear guidelines for how contract agencies spend MPRI grants. Marlan ordered the audit shortly after taking over the program a year ago.

Marlan said Thursday that he would meet next week with representatives from Michigan's 18 administrative agencies — most of them Michigan Works! sites — to discuss issues raised by the audit. Those 18 agencies subcontract with hundreds of community-based nonprofits, landlords and other service providers to assist the 12,000 parolees who leave Michigan prisons each year. Most of the money goes to housing and employment assistance.

MDOC will issue new guidelines and decide which programs should continue within three weeks, Marlan said. A preliminary proposal would have cut the \$33 million a year sent to community programs by 26%, he said.

Administrative agencies say a lot more is at stake.

MPRI has helped reduce the state's prison population, after decades of steady increases, saving the state hundreds of millions of dollars. Recidivism rates for parolees in MPRI programs have dropped by a third. Michigan's overall recidivism rate is now a relatively low 33%.

Don't cut programs that work

Corrections must do three things:

■ First, it must set appropriate guidelines, policies and rates — and then monitor compliance by visiting these sites regularly. Administrative agencies have already asked for such guidelines.

■ Second, Corrections must ensure, if it does cut back, that accountable and effective programs around the state continue to operate. Goodwill Industry of Greater Detroit's Flip the Script Program, for example, has placed in permanent employment nearly 70% of the 180 parolees it serves each year. Even so, program director Keith Bennett told the Free Press Thursday that he was told to end all transitional job programs by the end of March. It's counterproductive to punish effective programs because a few agencies acted inappropriately.

■ Finally, Corrections must rebuild relations with community agencies, recognizing that its own lack of oversight caused most of the problems. In a March 28 letter to MDOC Director Richard McKeon, area administrators objected to proposed "unilateral changes." Marlan has acknowledged that he should have first talked with MPRI's administrative agencies about the changes.

Corrections and the agencies that run local prisoner re-entry programs must now work together to create a more effective, transparent and accountable system that does not risk the public's essential support.

PS U.S. SUPREME COURT Justice Antonin Scalia was ticketed recently for following too closely and causing a four-car fender bender on a Washington parkway. Will he appeal?