STAN SNIFF: Inmate rehabilitation contingent on jail space

BY STAN SNIFF / Contributing Writer
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Education and rehabilitation programs? Drug treatment and mental health support? Alternatives to incarceration? Check, check and check. Riverside County jails offer – and have offered for decades – an extensive network of assistance programs for inmates willing to address problems, acquire skills and improve their prospects of success upon release into our communities.

Such programs have become a hot topic in the Inland region, given the chronic crowding in county jails, changes to state law that have exacerbated crowding and planned and in progress jail expansion projects.

Indeed, these dynamics have led some community leaders to call for just the sort of rehabilitation and anti-recidivism resources the Sheriff’s Department has been providing for years. But before embarking on new programs that, in many cases, would duplicate existing efforts, it is worth understanding the inmate support network already in place.

The Sheriff’s Department provides a broad range of assistance, tailored to the needs of individual inmates, in conjunction with Riverside County Office of Education and county-agency partners, such as the Department of Mental Health, Department of Public Social Services, the Economic Development Agency-Workforce Development Division and the Probation Department.

Many of these programs date back decades, though the Sheriff’s Department has refined, evolved and expanded its assistance portfolio over the years. Programs today include an evidence-based, scientifically proven mix of education, counseling, mental health support, job-skills development, drug treatment and probation supervision and case management. The department also offers a special program for military veterans to ease re-entry into the community. More broadly, education and workforce readiness programs include GED and high school diploma assistance, career technical education and training in print shops and graphics, computer information systems and construction and landscape technology.
These programs, along with alternatives to jail, such as electronic monitoring and work-release, have provided assistance and opportunity for tens of thousands of local inmates over the years, with countless success stories as inmates developed critical mental, professional and life skills.

The department’s Residential Substance Abuse Treatment program, for instance, has helped many former inmates achieve enduring change. Examples include:

- After graduation from the RSAT program in 2003, Mark – previously homeless and arrested more than 60 times – established a heavy equipment business and served as an active member in his local community for many years. He remarried and established a nonprofit to provide shelter and support in the community for those battling addiction and earned a Ph.D. in Historical and Cultural Hebrew. He remains a guest speaker for the RSAT program, reminding participants that it is never too late to change their lives. He received the Sheriff’s Community Service Medal in 2010 for his courage, integrity and good example.

- After Matthew completed the RSAT program in 2009, he took his counselor’s advice and obtained a job at a big-box retailer, where he worked up the ranks to become manager of the produce department. He has rebuilt relationships with his family and friends, owns a house and has become a responsible citizen. Sheriff’s staff still see him when visiting the local big-box store that employs him.

- Cynthia, a heroin addict for more than 20 years, completed the RSAT program in 2009. Since her release, she has written two books sold on Amazon.com and has appeared on talk shows and been featured in articles about her work. She now lives in Arizona, married in 2014 and recently opened a clothing store and hair salon. Her third book will be released in December.

Granted, not all inmates attain such success. Some still struggle despite receiving comprehensive help and others decline the voluntary programs. Jail crowding, in fact, impedes rehabilitation because inmates poised for early release lack the incentive to complete any of the rehabilitation programs available.

While Assembly Bill 109, the state realignment measure of 2011, exacerbated local jail crowding, it also increased state funding for jail rehabilitation programs. The Sheriff’s Department has used these additional resources to expand comprehensive support for inmate rehabilitation and adjust programs as needed.
to assist longer-term inmates. Prior to realignment, inmates typically served no longer than a year in jail. Since realignment, which rerouted “low-level” felons from state prison to county jails, the inmate mix has changed: As of late August, about 9 percent of Riverside County inmates are serving sentences longer than 3 years.

The Sheriff’s Department will continue to refine and enhance the county’s rehabilitation network to serve the shifting needs of the jail population. Amid the talk of boosting rehabilitation efforts, the community would do well to remember how much the Sheriff’s Department is already doing, and understand the barriers – lack of jail space in particular – to achieving more.

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