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Opinion



South Carolina Department of Corrections Director Bryan Stirling wants help in preventing criminals from using cellphones. Lawmakers are calling for the fast-tracking of a measure that would allow contraband cellphones inside the state's prisons to be shut down through the power of a court order. Provided

Bryan Stirling: Reentry, jobs program helps SC offenders start new life

- BY BRYAN STIRLING
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Today we will open a two-year reentry center for our maximum-security offenders at Lieber Correctional Institution in Ridgeville.

Eighty-five percent of those released from the S.C. Department of Corrections will have served five years or less in prison. For this reason, we started an extensive reentry program in 2014 to help offenders returning to our communities across South Carolina. We help offenders find employment, housing and the support needed to succeed. These efforts have paid off with historically low return-to-prison rates, saving tax dollars and making our state safer.

The Corrections Department shifted the mission of Manning Reentry/Work Release Center, making it a place to give offenders the tools they need to succeed after release. We partnered with the state's jobs agency, the Department of Employment and Workforce, to start this process.

The minimum-security prison now functions more like a job and retraining center, with offenders attending classes, learning work skills and practicing for job interviews. Peer counselors, through a grant from the Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services, work with folks inside and transition them back into society safely and successfully. The program has expanded to include partnerships with multiple state agencies and private organizations and has become a comprehensive reentry center.

After we started seeing results, we worked with the governor and the Legislature to fund similar programs for medium-security male offenders at Kershaw Correctional Institution and for women at Camille Graham Correctional Institution.

The final piece of this new vision opens today for our maximum-security offenders, who will spend the last two years of their sentences at Lieber. This program, modeled after best practices from around the country, is a crucial piece of our commitment to prepare offenders to return home and not come back to prison, saving tax dollars and making South Carolina safer.

Most folks who will go through the program at Lieber have been incarcerated for a long time. Imagine being dropped off some place without any identification, housing or a job after being incarcerated for 25-30 years. That has been the reality for these folks. But it will not be the case anymore.

Things are vastly different today than when these men first entered prison. They have to learn job skills, know how to explain their incarceration, and manage their time, mental health and a "new normal." This can be overwhelming for some.

We are knocking down barriers to successful reentry by working with state agencies and charities to secure identification, housing and employment to create a good, stable foundation. That can also mean anger management, addiction treatment and a host of other things to help them succeed so they do not return to prison at great societal and taxpayer cost.

South Carolina's unemployment rate is historically low, and employers are embracing the idea of giving folks a second chance, especially those who have taken advantage of the training programs the Corrections Department offers. Our jobs/skills programs target the needs of S.C. companies and train offenders in work skills that are in high demand.

What can you do to help? If you are an employer, consider taking advantage of available tax credits by providing a second chance to a returning citizen. We have strong partnerships with many manufacturing and warehousing companies and are always looking for more. If you can volunteer your time and talent, we have 21 institutions that could use your help. We simply could not provide all the services and programming to get people ready to return to society without our strong volunteer base.

Setting up our fellow citizens for a successful reentry back into society is good for everyone. It saves taxpayer dollars, makes our state safer and is just the right thing to do. Please consider volunteering or partnering with us. For our returning citizens, there's nothing like a second chance.

Bryan Stirling is director of the S.C. Department of Corrections.