



For immediate release

IDOC Addressing the Next Great Challenge to Corrections: Offenders with Special Needs

Indianapolis, Indiana (March 11, 2014) – The Indiana Department of Correction (IDOC) is taking steps to improve the quality of care for mentally ill offenders.

“Across the country, offenders with mental health needs pose a unique challenge for correctional facilities. By working with our partners in criminal justice and community stakeholders, we are providing a more therapeutic environment that is better for the safety of our facilities and better for the offenders,” states IDOC Commissioner Bruce Lemmon.

The IDOC has partnered with Corizon Correctional Healthcare, Mental Health America of Indiana, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness Indiana (NAMI) to establish a comprehensive staff training program designed to increase the knowledge and skills needed to work with special needs offenders. Created by both correctional professionals and mental health practitioners, the curriculum teaches both groups of professionals how to manage this population in a way that is safe and conducive to their treatment.

Specialized units designed to meet the needs of the seriously mentally ill in the least restrictive setting have also been established in four IDOC facilities throughout the state, including the Indiana Women’s Prison, Pendleton Correctional Facility, New Castle Correctional Facility, and Wabash Valley Correctional Facility. Currently more than 5,000 offenders, or approximately 12 percent of the state’s prison population, have been diagnosed with some degree of mental illness.

These changes were recently seen first –hand by U.S. District Judge Tanya Walton Pratt and representatives of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Indiana. In December 2012, following a lawsuit filed by the ACLU, Judge Pratt ruled in that “mentally ill prisoners within the IDOC segregation units are not receiving adequate mental health care in terms of scope, intensity and duration,” and ordered the IDOC to devise a plan to improve services to mentally ill offenders.

“The purpose of our litigation was to make sure that seriously mentally ill prisoners would be able to obtain necessary treatment. In opening up the new unit at Pendleton – where prisoners have gone from the isolation of segregation to multiple hours of treatment a day and additional hours outside of their cells – the DOC has altered its approach from a punitive one to one that treats. This is quite impressive,” stated Kenneth Falk, Legal Director for ACLU of Indiana.

Through the partnership with NAMI, all new IDOC employees and veteran staff will receive training to better prepare them to work with offenders with mental health needs, including interaction with individuals and families who have been affected by mental illness. Select staff will receive further specialized training to become Certified Treatment Specialists. Nearly 300 IDOC staff have already obtained this certification.

Another unique aspect of this innovative approach is that specially qualified offenders are trained to serve as peer mentors. The peer mentors will work directly with the offenders with mental health needs to assist them with their day-to-day needs.

Additional programs are in the development phase and expected to roll out in 2014.

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Media Contact:

Douglas S. Garrison

Chief Communications Officer

Indiana Department of Correction

dsgarrison@idoc.in.gov

317-232-5780