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## Helping ex-cons stay out of prison

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By **MAYA KREMEN**  
**HERALD NEWS**

PATERSON - The chairman of the state Parole Board called together local pastors, non-profit workers, teachers and social service providers Wednesday for a single reason: to ask for their help.

"The causes of recidivism are difficult and complex, and the challenges and barriers facing ex-offenders as they reenter the community are daunting," John D'Amico said at Passaic County Community College. "That's why we need your assistance."



KYE-RYUNG LEE / HERALD NEWS

Using a spreadsheet presentation full of statistics about the high number of state parolees and the high number who go back to prison, D'Amico told the audience of more than 200 that, by donating time and resources, they could help ex-offenders find jobs, transportation, drug treatment and spiritual guidance.

▲ John D'Amico, chairman of the state Parole Board, speaks at Passaic County Community College Wednesday.

He quoted the Bible and Mother Teresa - she once said the worst disease in the world is "the absence of love and caring." He mentioned a church program in South Jersey that donates dental care, haircuts, transportation, jobs and security deposits to parolees.

Conference participants had mixed reactions: Some said his energy was inspiring; others wondered where the money for programs would come from.

"Politically and verbally it's correct, but the internal mechanisms have to meet the speech," said the Rev. Joseph Robinson, pastor of Paterson's Pilgrimage Outreach Ministries. He said additional services to parolees would add to the numerous costs churches already have.

The meeting was the fourth in a series of conferences in North Jersey in the past year. Their goal, D'Amico said, is to inspire community leaders to form task forces to help combat problems that often plague ex-offenders.

After D'Amico's speech, participants broke up into smaller groups to discuss issues such as homelessness, gang reduction and education. At a breakaway session for faith-based initiative leaders, state Assemblyman and Paterson pastor Alfred Steele told other leaders that it is their spiritual duty to provide for ex-offenders.

"We can't say to that person, 'Be well, I'll pray for you,'" he said. "We have to make provisions to answer their prayers."

By the end of the meeting, 97 people had signed up for the local task force. Charley Flynt, a panel member and the coordinator of the criminal justice program at William Paterson University, said the interest was encouraging.

"We need more of these in this state," she said. "It'll give people support and hope that there are people out there doing things because it's the right thing to do."

But down the hall at a breakaway session about employment, participants said problems deeper than any one community can fix stand in ex-offenders' ways.

They mentioned, for example, the trouble ex-offenders have in getting access to subsidized public housing and welfare benefits.

Mary Mulvany of the Hackensack-based Bergen County Community Action Program said that despite the presence of many state-sponsored, one-stop career centers, a shortage of jobs and job training continues to affect ex-offenders.

"It's one thing to say to send everyone to the one-stop," she said. "But if there's not enough training, and there are not going to be enough spots, what can you do?"

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### **Out of prison, still in trouble:**

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- There are 14,153 people on parole statewide.
- In Passaic County, 494 people are on parole, 446 of them in Paterson.
- More than 50 percent of released state inmates have a drug or alcohol problem.
- 15 to 20 percent of people released from prison are mentally ill, and 15 to 20 percent of prisoners suffer from at least one chronic health condition, such as asthma, diabetes or hypertension.
- The average level of education for state inmates is sixth grade or lower.
- 1,300 state offenders a year are released as "placement cases," meaning they lack a place to live.

Source: New Jersey Parole Board

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