

## **Sheriff Launches Skills Program for Inmates**

Services: They will get vocational training and social services before and after they leave jail to help in transition to outside life.

By BETH SHUSTER, Times Staff Writer

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, along with other county and community agencies, launched an ambitious effort Tuesday aimed at easing inmates' transition from jail to life on the outside.

The program will provide in-custody classes and vocational skills training for thousands of inmates, followed by referrals to outside agencies upon their release. In some cases, sheriff's officials say they will take inmates to transitional housing or other facilities before their release, and in other cases, organizations will meet inmates as they leave the jails.

The effort is part of Sheriff Lee Baca's emerging program to rehabilitate inmates rather than simply warehouse them. In the sheriff's view, inmates who are busy attending classes are less likely to cause problems inside the jails and they may be less likely to return to jail.

"This is a giant leap forward in how we are doing business," Baca said at a packed open house at the Twin Towers Correctional Facility. "There is no question when a person comes to jail, they have problems. The question is what is the bureaucracy going to do about these problems."

The program will begin primarily with mentally ill and homeless inmates, who will get referrals for transitional housing and contacts for medical assistance to maintain medications when they are released.

Sheriff's officials, who run the largest jail system in the country, say the approach is unique and offers a chance to increase the numbers of inmates taking classes in jails and to reduce recidivism.

Chief John Anderson, who oversees the sheriff's Correctional Services Division, said law enforcement officers now have the chance to change people's lives for the better.

"You hook and you book, you never think about the impact you can have on people's lives," Anderson said.

A few hundred people representing public and private community organizations attended the event, with many offering their services.

U.S. Circuit Judge Harry Pregerson said he was amazed by the turnout. "I always thought if you opened the doors of the jail, everyone would run away," he said.

Instead, it appeared that numerous agencies are ready to become partners with the Sheriff's Department to provide services for inmates during their jail terms and after they are released. The Veterans Affairs Department already is working with the jails to identify inmates who need benefits and to assist them when their terms end.

Although the Sheriff's Department expects to book and release about 165,388 people this year, officials said some inmates will not be eligible to participate in the program. About 40% of the inmates will not be included because they have been sentenced to state prison and are typically awaiting transportation to those facilities.

Among the questions for the Sheriff's Department are whether inmates will take advantage of the in-custody programs and whether they will be incarcerated long enough for the classes to have an effect; the average jail term is about 44 days.

Still, sheriff's officials are undeterred. They say that even if only 5% of the inmates take advantage of the program, the department will be serving hundreds of people.

(Currently, about 4,000 inmates are involved in educational or vocational training in the county jails, with most of those programs offered by the Hacienda La Puente School District.)

The department is revamping its classification system so that more inmates could be eligible for these classes. Inmates will be assessed when they arrive and offered programs and classes. Before they are released, inmates will be given a discharge plan with contacts for continuing their programs.

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