

JIM KENYON

CREATIVE CORRECTIONS

Sometimes having a county government that is — for all practical purposes — financially tapped out can be a good thing. It forces those working on the public's behalf to identify priorities and, most importantly, use their imaginations when confronted with challenging problems.



When Ross Cunningham took over as superintendent of Sullivan County's Department of Corrections last August, he was handed plans for a new jail in Unity to replace the one built 30 years ago for 44 inmates, but which now regularly houses twice that many. As much as Cunningham would have liked new digs for

inmates and the jail's staff, he knew Sullivan's legislative delegation, which has the final say on construction projects, would never approve the project. Not with a price tag of \$45 million, anyway.

Sullivan County simply doesn't have that kind of money. Residents in working-class communities like Claremont and Newport are already struggling to pay their property tax bills as it is.

But a small piece of the proposed project caught Cunningham's eye.

Inside the \$45 million plan was a \$4.3 million allotment for something called a Community Corrections Center to be located in a building that looks more like a college dormitory than part of a county jail complex. Rehabilitation rather than punishment would be the center's focus, a foreign concept in New Hampshire, where in recent years the prison population has grown at a rate second only to Kentucky's.

The idea behind the center is to create an environment that helps inmates, both men and women, kick their drug and alcohol habits. Roughly 80 percent of New Hampshire's inmates are substance-abusers. If not serving time for drug convictions, they likely were caught doing something illegal to support their habits, or committed a crime while under the influence.

For way too long, New Hampshire has treated its jails as warehouses. Judges sentence offenders to treatment all the time. But there are only four nonprofit rehabilitation options in the state. Offenders spend months in jail — at a cost of \$64 a day to taxpayers — waiting for a vacancy.

Here's where Cunningham got creative: Instead of pushing for a new jail the county could not afford, he proposed just building the Community Corrections Center.

Cunningham, who has worked in New Hampshire's Department of Corrections for 18 years, didn't have to sell John Gramuglia on the idea. Gramuglia, a substance abuse counselor, is the Sullivan County jail's director of programming. He realizes that New Hampshire's jails have revolving doors, with about seven of every 10 inmates having done time more than once, many starting in their early 20s.

Most of the people they know are the ones they meet behind bars. In fact, jails have become fraternities, so much so that inmates have their own name for the state's Department of Corrections. They call it the Department of Connections. "It's like an alumni club," said Gramuglia. "The fear of incarceration doesn't exist any more."

Although community corrections centers have caught on in other states, Sullivan County would be home to New Hampshire's first. In February, Grafton County's legislative delegation approved spending \$40 million in taxpayer money to build a new jail. The plan includes space and resources dedicated to helping inmates with their substance abuse problems. Still it doesn't go nearly as far as Sullivan County's proposal, where inmates would undergo 75 to 90 days of intensive treatment and counseling in their own dormitory. Along with the bricks and mortar, Cunningham is seeking money to hire two additional substance abuse clinicians and a mental health counselor.

Inmates would be up at 6 in the morning, making beds and ironing clothes before heading off to therapy. "The public wants to be tough on crime," Cunningham told me. "The program we're proposing would be tougher than anything (offenders) are going through now. The hardest thing for any offender to do is face their addiction."

Upon completing their programs, inmates could return to court to ask for early release. "We want them to earn their way out, not just be in here doing time," said Cunningham.

The Community Corrections Center proposal already has the support of Sullivan County's judges. So far, feedback has been so positive that Cunningham is considering expanding the number of proposed beds from 43 to 68, which would increase the cost to \$5.6 million. He's also asking for an additional \$1.5 million to make safety improvements, including a sprinkler system, at the old jail.

Last Monday, Cunningham and Gramuglia drove to Newport for an 8 a.m. meeting with the Newport Revitalization Committee. Along with selling politicians on the plan, they are mustering public support. Their presentation included photographs of what the proposed dormitory-style corrections center would look like. Jim Lantz, a Newport jeweler and school board member, was the first in the audience to speak up:

"There's no fence?" he asked.

"No fence," Cunningham replied.

"I'm so delighted you're going in this direction," Lantz said, "rather than building high fences and concrete cells."

The Sullivan legislative delegation is expected to vote on the project this summer. I only hope lawmakers can be as creative as the guy running their jail.

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