

[Program eyes mental health in corrections](#)

Experts in supervision to combine forces with mental health experts

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OTTUMWA — More than 90 percent of the state’s criminal offenders will come back to Iowa communities. Corrections officials want them to return with a good chance to be successful, regardless of whether they have mental health issues.

The Iowa Department of Correctional Services is starting a mental health supervision program facilitated by a parole officer and a network of supporters in Wapello County.

“The number of mentally ill offenders in the correctional [system] surprised even me,” said Daniel Fell, director of Eighth Judicial District Correctional Services.

There are nearly 9,000 offenders in Iowa prisons. Around 40 percent of the male population has a chronic mental illness. The number for women is even higher. Specific numbers aren’t available for the 30,000 offenders out of prison and under supervision. But even if it’s half the rate of those in prison, that’s thousands, said Fell.

Fell said research shows prison doesn’t benefit certain mentally ill people. That means it doesn’t benefit the public either, since most of these offenders will be released either with supervision, or, if they complete their time, without department supervision.

Fell and his staff applied for a four-year grant from the Governor’s Office of Drug Control Policy. The new program is highly specialized and intensively supervised by a parole officer. Instead of nearly 100 cases, the officer will handle about 25 of what Fell called the “most time-consuming” cases. A key to the program: the officer will be partnered full time with a state-licensed mental health therapist.

For years before they applied for this grant, Fell’s director of special services, Vince Remmark, ran a focus committee of parole and probation officers discussing how best to address mental illness in the offender population.

“This is another option for our judicial system ... for non-violent offenders,” Remmark said.

He explained a network of professionals could refer an offender to the mental health supervision program. Judges, parole officers, public defenders and prosecutors may recognize that if only an individual had the right kind of support, they’d be able to stay out of trouble — and out of prison.

It’s better for the offender and for society, Remmark said, and also more cost effective. Prison costs \$31,000 per year per inmate. The supervised mental health program runs about \$9,000 per

person.

Not everyone referred will be taken into the program. Probation and Parole Officer Kurt Rosenberg will assess each candidate with assistance from a mental health counselor the district is looking to hire.

He said he'll need to work with each offender to learn their needs and what motivates them to succeed.

"One [important aspect is] having the time to develop that rapport, to find that one thing that will motivate that individual. Another important part of this is public safety," said Rosenberg.

If he thinks public safety is jeopardized, he'll have to come down hard. If there's a different type of mistake, he may be able to educate the offender.

With a mental health therapist and a PO, said Fell, he's optimistic about the chance of success for the program.

"Let us be the experts in the supervision end of things; they'll be the experts in the mental health aspect, and we work together to reintegrate that person back into society as a law-abiding citizen."

Proponents say it's a balance between responsibility and sanctions, between treatment and accountability.

"You may have a mental illness, but you're still accountable for your actions. You must also be responsible for taking your medication [and] for attending your mental health appointments," Fell said.