

# Ottumwa Residential Facility expanding

Iowa facilities straddle line between prison and private life

By **MATT MILNER**  
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*(Editor's Note: Eighth Judicial District Director Dan Fell and Iowa Department of Corrections Director John Baldwin recently met with the Ottumwa Courier's editorial board to discuss the expansion of the Ottumwa Residential Facility. ORF is the only residential facility in the Eighth Judicial District used to house both male and female offenders and not the entire state as suggested in the story below.)*

**OTTUMWA** — Most Ottumwa residents don't think often of the Ottumwa Residential Facility. That's usually the way the Iowa Department of Corrections likes it.

When people think about a prison, probation office or residential facility, it frequently means something has gone wrong. Anonymity, blending in to the community, is much more preferable for those who run the corrections department.

The Ottumwa Residential Facility currently houses 51 people, both male and female. The residential facilities in Iowa straddle the line between prison and private life. They officially provide "quasi-incarceration," highly regulated living conditions with the opportunity to work in the community at large.

"It really is a unique mix," said John Baldwin, director of the Iowa Department of Corrections.

Ottumwa is expanding. When complete, the additional space will allow an increase in the number of residents to between 76 and 78 people. The groundbreaking ceremony is currently scheduled for May 2010. That puts the expansion into use in January 2011 if everything goes as expected.

While plans for the expansion came together recently, it was in officials' minds long before the current need emerged. Baldwin said the Ottumwa facility, which is located on the northern edge of town in the industrial park past the national guard armory, was placed with that in mind.

"When we built the one at the current location, we envisioned further expansion," he said.

Dan Fell, director for the DOC in the Eighth Judicial District, said expansion is especially important for female offenders in Iowa. None of the other residential facilities is set up to accommodate female inmates, so the women come to Ottumwa from across the state.

Residential facilities are much closer to imprisonment than other options open to the correctional system. Community corrections with low-risk offenders are the bottom of the scale, followed by increasingly intensive supervision. Those apply to people who are on parole or probation, as well as those who are out on pre-trial release.

People in the residential facilities sign in and out, but are allowed to leave the facilities for long periods during the day if they have reason.

"They can leave and work, they can do furloughs," Fell said. "It's not a lockdown facility."

Only 29 percent of the people are in residential facilities or prisons at any given time. The average stay in one of Iowa's residential sites is four months. Most Iowa offenders are already back in the community at some level.

Baldwin said those numbers are very different from those from only a few years ago. The overall prison population is down, but the population at residential facilities is not. The shifts represent what officials are calling a stronger effort to ensure those who have committed crimes have better opportunities to re-enter society.

But none of that explains exactly why high-level officials with the department are trying to draw attention to the Ottumwa facility. It comes down to trying to manage people's expectations and promoting understanding.

"There can be a lot of misunderstandings in the public about what we do," said Jerry Burt, deputy director for the eastern region.

Baldwin said the expansion, which is being mirrored at other locations around the state, offers a clear opportunity to clear up issues and make sure the public knows how its money is being spent outside prison walls.

"This is such a pivotal moment for us," he said.