

Halfway house expands, hires new supervisor

By MATT MILNER

OTTUMWA — There are a lot of changes under way for the Ottumwa Residential Correctional Facility, a halfway house operated by Iowa's Department of Corrections.

The biggest change is expansion of the facility. Budget woes at the state level have prompted many states to reconsider their approach to handling convicted criminals, especially those who did not commit violent offenses. Maintaining large prison populations is expensive, so states are looking at ways to bring people out of prison and still maintain public safety.

Facilities like the one in Ottumwa fit that goal. Supervision remains intensive, but the people at the Ottumwa facility maintain jobs and are eased back into society. That also helps reduce the number of offenders who wind up back in prison.

Expanding the number of beds in Ottumwa is not a new idea. The first discussions took place years ago. The Eighth Judicial District's Department of Correctional Services Board met in Fairfield Wednesday to discuss making that expansion reality.

Ottumwa's facility was one of four in Iowa at the top of the list for possible expansion. The architect and engineer were selected last year, but things have been fairly quiet since then. That is changing.

"Our next step is next Wednesday ... going to West Des Moines to touch base with the Department of Corrections," said Daniel Fell, the district's director.

He expects things to move quickly in the upcoming months. Financing for the expansion is in place, and the facility will remain operating while the expansion proceeds. The complications caused by normal operations and the construction work are a big reason the department went ahead and filled critical roles in Ottumwa despite a statewide budget crunch.

"It's an exciting time. The Department of Corrections has told us that now that the ball is rolling they want to keep it rolling," Fell said.

The facility currently has space for 50 or so people. The expansion adds another 30 beds.

Supervisor Jerry Parker, Wapello County's representative on the board, said the construction will bring jobs in the short term, but the long range benefits involve issues most people probably don't consider.

"The big thing is that people in the county jail have to go to a halfway house before they get out," said Parker. Increasing the capacity means decreasing any wait for inmates at the jail.

The Ottumwa facility also has a new supervisor. Fell announced Ted Robinson's promotion to the position after Robinson stepped in and filled multiple roles over the past several years. "Ted took on a lot of the responsibilities when supervisor Don Bruess was activated in the National Guard for two years," Fell said.

Robinson worked his way up at the facility from a line officer.