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Expansion for corrections facility proposed

Proposal includes 25 new beds

By **MATT MILNER** Courier staff writer

OTTUMWA — When Gov. Chet Culver announced a plan to expand the state's correctional system, he suggested adding 25 beds to a place most people don't even know exists.

Ottumwa has a corrections facility. It's part of the prison system, and it's a good bet that most people in the area don't even know it's there. Manager Mike Baker likes it that way. It means everything is working the way it should.

Baker and Residential Supervisor Donn Bruess like the proposal to add beds at the Ottumwa Residential Correctional Facility. They need the additional space. Rooms originally designed for two people now hold three. The plan for a 40-bed facility morphed into a place that holds more than 50 people.

It doesn't sound like much, but that's a minimum of 25 percent over capacity.

The facility is part of the state's prison system, but it functions differently from most other locations. Where prisons focus on housing inmates, the ORCF is a halfway house designed to help people move back into society. Residents run from prisoners on work release to probationers who need additional supervision and people convicted of multiple drunken driving offenses. Even the federal bureau of prisons occasionally sends someone to Ottumwa.

"Our primary purpose is helping people readjust and become productive citizens," Baker said.

"We wear so many hats," Bruess agreed.

Programs like the ones run at the ORCF are popular in the correctional system because they help change habits with a sharp focus on the individual. Inmates can receive a GED through classes at the facility. That's a big deal for people. Every graduate gets a photo taken in a cap and gown.

Employees also teach job and social skills. The inmates work, and they pay up to \$18 per day to live at the facility. That helps offset the approximately \$70 per day it costs the state to operate in Ottumwa.

Bruess and Baker are quick to point out that \$70 is a bargain compared to the costs of housing an inmate in even a minimum-security prison. And there's another benefit to the state when the Ottumwa inmates work: They pay taxes.

Working helps inmates with another challenge. No one lives at the ORCF permanently. They move out at some point, and they need money to find a place to live. Staff members teach the inmates how to save money and budget so they can afford to live on their own when their release dates come. The financial cushion helps ease the shock of moving from a regulated environment to one with very little structure.

The popularity comes with a cost. Baker said there is a long waiting list for people who want to get in. The list has never fallen below 60 names over the past five years. Expanding will not eliminate the waiting list, but it will help.

“One of the problems we have is it takes four months to get in here. And what choice [other than jail or prison] does the parole officer have?” Bruess said. He views both as bad options for rehabilitation because neither helps the person break bad habits.

“We think taxpayers get more bang for their buck out of corrections than prison,” Baker explained.

Given the waiting list, the overcrowding, and the numerous roles employees fill, you might think Baker and Bruess would be less than happy about plans to expand. But they like the idea.