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OVRJCF hosts public leadership forum

BY RYAN SCOTT OTTNEY
PDT Staff Writer
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FRANKLIN FURNACE - The Department of Youth Services is traveling the state of Ohio conducting Community Leadership Forums, to bring community partners together to share services, ideas and information in order to benefit youth offenders as they prepare for their transition home. On Thursday, the state brought its forum to Ohio River Valley Juvenile Correctional Facility in Franklin Furnace.

According to the DYS, 2,000 juveniles were expected to be released in 2005. Thirty percent were expected to return within one year, and 50 percent expected to return within three years.

"Those numbers haven't changed much over the years. It's my belief that we can do better," said Thomas Strickrath, director of DYS.

With the help of re-entry services, Strickrath said he hopes to reduce those numbers significantly.

"Re-entry is so important to us, because all of the kids in DYS facilities will be returning to Ohio's communities. So everywhere I travel across the state of Ohio, I remind our communities and our citizens that it's important that we do right with these kids while they're here, and get their lives turned around, and that we get the community engaged," he said.

This is the third DYS forum throughout Ohio, and will be followed by Cincinnati and Dayton. The Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections also is hosting a series of similar forums across Ohio. Both forums are partnered with State Rep. John White, of Ohio's 38th district in Kettering, who also sponsors two House bills that concern re-entry services.

One of these bills, House Bill 113, already has passed the House and now awaits approval in the Senate. The bill proposes to permit of all approved and registered non-profit community organizations to enter institutions for the purpose of providing re-entry services to inmates or delinquent children.

White spoke during the forum, saying while his party traditionally has been tough on crime, he believes it's time for a new approach. He said it's important to be tough, but also not to forget "the love."

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ORVJCF Chaplain James Willis spoke during the forum, recalling one young boy he encountered inside the Franklin Furnace facility. The boy, he said, wanted to come to Bible study classes, but always was very disruptive to the class.

"I struggled with this youth the whole time he was here. Well, he got released, as all of our youths do, and he went back to his community in Cincinnati. And I thought, 'He'll be back.' He wasn't just a problem for me, he was a problem in school, he was a problem in recreation, and he was a difficult youth to have on the unit," he said.

About a year after this boy's release, Willis said he received a call from the boy's family in Cincinnati, who told him he was killed in an on-the-job construction accident.

Willis choked back his tears as he repeated the words this boy's mother had said to him. "We wanted to donate some Bibles to the facility because he said he changed at that facility," he said the boy's mother told him.

Willis said before the accident, the boy went back to Cincinnati and became very active in his local church, and even was able to convince his parents to get involved with the church, too.

"This stuff does work, but we can't change them. They have to decide that's what they want," he said. "But we have to keep telling them that there is a different way of life for them."

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