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Japanese Officials Visit Gemeinschaft

Local Program To Be Considered In Japan

By [David Reynolds](#)

HARRISONBURG — Two years ago, Japan overhauled its laws that govern the lives of prisoners in the hope of reducing recidivism in that country, according to several Japanese officials visiting Harrisonburg this week.

It's the same challenge that officials at the Gemeinschaft Home in Harrisonburg and the Virginia Department of Corrections have struggled with for years.

So, since early last week, three Japanese prison officials have been in Harrisonburg shaking hands with inmates, judges and politicians as part of a crash course on the tricky science of prisoner rehabilitation.

"We are more and more aware of human rights," said Kay Maeda, a professor with Japan Lutheran College in Tokyo. "And we are searching for new ways of rehabilitating prisoners."

On Monday, Gemeinschaft held a reception for Maeda and two other officials who work with prisoners in Japan — Hideki Shinada, of Japan's Ministry of Justice and Shoichi Suzuki of Japan's Bureau of Rehabilitation.

Their visit, which has included a tour of Department of Corrections facilities around Virginia, ends Friday.

Starting From Scratch

The three Japanese officials had differing ideas on how a "transitional therapeutic" program like Gemeinschaft's, would work in Japan, which has a very different criminal justice system than the United States.

Maeda, who teaches communication and social skills in Japan's prisons, says that nation's system traditionally puts inmates to work leaving little time for education, counseling and job-skills training.

But a recent change in Japanese law has officials there looking for new ways to treat drug addicts, sex offenders and also help prisoners prepare for jobs after their release, Maeda said.

As a Japanese probation officer, Suzuki oversees 150 ex-cons. He's also charged with planning a new "after-care" program that will keep Japanese prisoners from returning to the system.

Suzuki says he's enjoyed his visit and been surprised by how much more communicative inmates are in the United States than in Japan.

But he's also unsure whether a program like Gemeinschaft would succeed in a country that he says doesn't have the same tradition of church congregations supporting community programs.

Maeda says she's optimistic a program could work in Japan, but said that it would need financial support from the government.

During her stay here, she said she's been most impressed with a DOC program that works with women who are on probation and who have children.

"I [would] like to take back that idea of government taking care of the family, [while keeping] the family intact," Maeda said.

A Show Of Faith

Officials with Gemeinschaft and DOC said the attention the program is receiving shows they're doing something right.

Marshall Graham, an after-care specialist with the Virginia Department of Corrections, said that 80 percent of prisoners released straight from prison reoffend.

But that number is 30 percent among those with the support of a program like Gemeinschaft.

Jennie Amison, Gemeinschaft's executive director, says she's eager to pass the tenets of the program along.

"If [prisoners] are not doing anything to change their behavior and their way of thinking, then they get out and just do the same thing," Amison said.

She's visited Japan and corrections departments in other U.S. states to share the program.

Conchita Terry McIver, who runs a drug treatment program in Danville, is also learning about Gemeinschaft.

McIver says she would like to expand her program to contract with DOC, like Gemeinschaft does, and become an added resource for inmates.

"There's a great need for it," she said. "So many [inmates] don't have anywhere to go."