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Here They Come, Ready or Not

By Lynn A. Curtis

The Post reports that more than 2,500 prisoners from the District will be released during the next 12 months into a city ill-prepared for their return [Metro, July 21].

The House government reform subcommittee, chaired by Rep. Constance Morella, notes that reintegration of convicted felons is particularly challenging for the District because of its unusually high rates of recidivism and substance abuse. The District's halfway-house system also has been widely criticized for lack of efficacy and poor oversight.

But tough sentencing guidelines enacted in the early 1980s and '90s nationwide mean that other jurisdictions are grappling with the same tough questions that the District faces, and some have come up with programs that work.

In San Francisco, for example, more than 10,000 violent ex-offenders have come through a 30-year-old program called Delancey Street. This program -- run on a mix of tough love, hard work, training and lots of peer support -- teaches ex-felons to develop and run for-profit businesses. The Delancey Street program has been replicated in several places and could be reproduced in Washington too.

The District also could adopt the idea of police mini-stations and youth safe havens, which share the same space and have worked well in places as diverse as Columbia, S.C., New Hampshire and San Juan, Puerto Rico. Police in these mini-stations become an integral part of the inner-city community and function as mentors for young people as well as law officers. The safe havens, run by civilian nonprofit groups, provide young people with guidance and discipline between 3 p.m. and 10 p.m., the hours during which they are most likely to get in trouble.

The District also could find answers in Arizona, which has redirected nonviolent drug offenders from expensive prisons into community treatment. The result has been less expense to taxpayers and lower recidivism rates.

Whatever programs the District decides to adopt, it must move quickly, or most of the returning prisoners may end up back in prison after committing additional crimes.

Programs to support teenagers, prevent crime and reduce recidivism exist. All that is needed now in the District is the will to act.

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