

Van Buren copies successful parolee plan

What works in Berrien is expected to do the same in neighboring county

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PAW PAW — A crime-reduction program that was piloted in Berrien County will be coming to Van Buren County this fall.

Peggy Schaffer, regional coordinator for the Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative for Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties, said the program aimed at keeping felons from returning to crime has proven a success and will be instituted in Van Buren County beginning Oct. 1.

The MPRI program begins working with prison inmates before their release. Of the 11,000 inmates released each year, about 70 are from Van Buren County.

Of those 11,000, nearly half end up back in prison within two years.

Program workers try to develop a case-management plan based on what the inmate needs to keep him out of prison. The released inmates often face homelessness, no job or have mental, substance abuse or physical problems. They may be uneducated.

The goal is to get inmates the help they need to succeed and

“help that person reintegrate back into society,” Schaffer said.

And that reduces crime.

Schaffer said the MPRI is not an early-release program. “We are not soft on crime,” she said.

One of the biggest factors in success is having a job.

The 48 percent recidivism rate drops to 21 percent if a person has a job, even for as little as one day.

A job that lasts a month brings the recidivism rate down to 18 percent.

Having a job for a year lowers the recidivism rate to 8 percent.

The total success rate for a one-year period in Berrien County was 82 percent, which Schaffer called “very promising.” Working with other agencies, MPRI has found employment for 93 percent of the parolees it works with. Most of the jobs are industrial, food service and construction.

The program is funded by the state Department of Corrections, with Michigan Works! acting as the grant recipient.

In Berrien County the cost is \$625,000.

But if parolees are employed they’re contributing to society and paying taxes, and the state isn’t paying the \$30,000 a year that it costs just to keep them locked up, Schaffer said.

“This program has already paid for itself,” she said.

Michigan, she said, has the fifth largest corrections system in the country which this year cost \$1.8 billion.