

Task force reports on efforts to reduce Central Virginia recidivism

Samantha Koon | Posted: Saturday, April 21, 2012 8:52 pm

For about a year and a half, several prominent members of the city of Charlottesville and Albemarle County criminal justice systems have worked with the National Institute of Corrections to improve collaboration among the many organizations that work with offenders from arrest to reentry. The task force hopes to reduce re-arrest rates and criminal expenses in both the city and county.

Three members of the Evidence-Based Decision Making Initiative, a national task force sponsored by the NIC, addressed members of the Charlottesville Democratic Party Saturday morning at the Jefferson Madison Regional Library on Market Street. Charlottesville Commonwealth's Attorney Dave Chapman, Wendy Goodman, chief probation officer at District 9 Probation and Parole, and OAR Executive Director Pat Smith presented information and answered questions about the task force.

Through this nationwide initiative, the NIC hopes to equip local policymakers with "the information, processes, and tools that will result in measurable reductions of pretrial misconduct and post-conviction reoffending," according to the organization's website.

The task force is working on developing a "structured response system for probation violations" to more effectively hold offenders accountable by "responding to behavior in the manner most likely to result in behavior change," according to a handout from the task force.

"Some people you do more harm than good by bringing them into the [probation] office," Goodman said, explaining, for example, that it is not always appropriate to discipline first-time offenders alongside long-term offenders.

Goodman said that to help solve this problem, parole officers at District 9 are taking on "specialized caseloads." She said, for example, that one officer handles all of the district's domestic violence cases while another takes on sex offenders.

"It's just as important that we improve outcomes for the offenders to the commonwealth as anyone else," Chapman said, explaining that reducing recidivism rates is a pressing concern for the task force.

The task force is also working on organizing data collection within the justice system, Smith said.

“We collect a lot of data that amounts to nothing,” she said, adding that through the Evidence-Based Decision Making Initiative police officers, lawyers and parole officers can work together to identify which studies would be the most useful.

“We all have our own little data systems. They do not speak to each other,” Smith said.

The task force was recently awarded a grant through the Justice Reinvestment Initiative to help consolidate data collection, Goodman said.

Next, Goodman said the task force would like to address the issue of domestic violence, and see “where our gaps in service are.”

One member of the audience asked if the Evidence-Based Decision Making Initiative was related to the work group recently approved by the city council to address disproportionality issues in the juvenile justice system.

“There may be some overlap that may be discovered,” Chapman said, but stressed that the two groups are entirely separate.

Saturday’s meeting was designed to inform the public of the “everyday work of those who make up the criminal justice system,” Chapman said.

Charlottesville and Albemarle, jointly, were one of seven localities chosen nationwide to work on the task force, Goodman said. Other localities include Milwaukee County, Wis.; Ramsey County, Minn.; and Yamhill County, Ore.

“They’re all over the United States, but we’re the only site on the East Coast that was chosen,” Goodman said.

Smith added that she thinks Charlottesville and Albemarle were chosen because of their “great reputation” of working together on criminal justice issues.

When asked what the average citizen can do to address problems in the criminal justice system, Chapman advised the audience to “pay attention.” With the help of interested citizens, Chapman said that the criminal justice system can be “more effective or just as effective” in Charlottesville and Albemarle as the populations continue to grow.