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STATE NEWS

Panel looks at progress of daunting overhaul of Indiana criminal justice system



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INDIANAPOLIS — A group of experts from Indiana's judicial and legal system know they have their work cut out for them as they try to change the nature of the state's criminal justice system.

On Tuesday, those experts from all over the state came to Indianapolis to see how their pilot counties are progressing with a new evidence-based approach to punishment and incarceration as well as mull what the state's goals should be moving forward.

In 2015, Indiana was one of three states picked for a grant from the National Institute of Corrections to look at the Evidence-Based Decision Making approach to criminal justice. The approach is an attempt to shrink crime rates, reduce recidivism and promote a fair justice system.

Indiana picked six pilot counties — Bartholomew, Hamilton, Hendricks, Jefferson, Porter and Tipton — to try the new system and identify changes that can be rolled out to the entire state.

The state steering committee is chaired by Indiana Supreme Court Justice Steven David, who said the members were aware of the daunting nature of overhauling the state's criminal justice system, something he likened to making changes to an airplane while it was rolling down a runway.

"You can't say, 'time out, no crimes committed for the next six months,'" David said. "But we have a lot of representation here from many different agencies that realize that (changing on the fly) is the only option."

Judges, police, prosecutors, defense attorneys, lawmakers and mental health experts were all in attendance to discuss goals going forward. One of the possibilities raised by Sara Cozad, with the Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction, was making sure people who need treatment are going to health centers instead of prison.

Cozad said she would like to see fewer people with a serious mental illness or a substance use disorder go to jail when

treatment is a better option for them. She said arresting officers or defense attorneys can do a better job in Indiana of identifying who might be better served at rehab than jail, and she said once individuals with a mental illness do get proper treatment, they are less likely to get into trouble with the law again.

The point of the evidence-based system, David said, is realizing one size doesn't fit all when it comes to criminal justice and lots of ideas on how to make that idea work in Indiana were tossed around. Citations for minor offenses instead of arrests, no bail for low-risk offenders and more pretrial diversion options were some of many things the group looked at on Tuesday.

Ultimately, David said, this is going to be a very long process with some goals looking 15 years or more down the road as Indiana continues to change. But, he said the work done at the county level is already showing small changes are occurring.

"There are already a number of initiatives under way," he said.
"This is not 'stay tuned in 15 years.'"

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