



Higher Priority Should Be Given to Transition Services to Reduce Inmate Recidivism

at a glance

Transition services act as a bridge between incarceration and life in the community for newly released offenders. In the absence of meaningful transition services, offenders may return to illegal activities and prison. As a proactive cost avoidance measure, priority should be given to transition services as part of an overall strategy to reduce inmate recidivism.

The department's current transition services have several key limitations.

- While release planning addresses some inmate transition needs, key components are missing.
- The department's reliance on inmate self-study and high facilitator turnover and lapses in services can compromise transition preparation course effectiveness.
- Work release is limited; expanding it would produce cost savings and may reduce recidivism, but increases the risk to the public.
- Faith-based transitional housing beds are underutilized.
- The department lacks transitional housing beds for sex offenders.

Scope

Chapter 2006-25, *Laws of Florida*, directs OPPAGA to conduct a comprehensive review of the Department of Corrections. This report is one of a series and examines the department's transition services that prepare inmates for release to the community.

Background

In Fiscal Year 2005-06, Florida released 33,464 offenders from prison. Based on past studies, the department estimates that almost 40% of these released inmates will commit a new offense within three years. Nearly 26% will be returned to prison at a cost of \$163.4 million for their first year of reconfinement.¹

According to national research, the likelihood of recidivism is highest during the six-month period following release. Newly released offenders often have difficulty adjusting to life outside of prison due to their limited job-seeking experience, work history, and occupational skills, and health-related issues including mental health and substance abuse problems. Many former inmates have lost connections with family and have become institutionalized. These persons lack the basic

¹ The cost estimate is based on the department's Fiscal Year 2005-06 inmate cost per day of \$52.06.

life skills necessary to function in society and pose public safety risks to their communities.

To address this problem, the Legislature created the Transition Assistance Program Act, which mandates that the Department of Corrections (DOC) provide persons released from incarceration with certain fundamental resources to increase their likelihood of successful reentry into free society.² These three services include:

- release plans, which provide inmates with referrals to community resources;
- transition preparation, which is a 100-hour course completed by each inmate prior to release from incarceration and covers life and job skills;³
- transitional housing, which provides inmates with a home, food, and other services for up to a year following release.

Florida statutes also authorize inmates to participate in work release, which allows selected inmates to leave the facility to work at paid employment in the community during the last months of confinement.

Release plans and the 100-hour transitional course are provided to all inmates released from the custody of the department, including inmates who reside in private correctional facilities. Work release and transitional housing are available for a limited number of inmates who meet the program requirements. Under normal circumstances inmates are also given up to \$100 and transportation to an approved destination provided by common carrier using the most economical means available.⁴

² Sections 944.701-944.708, *F.S.*; Section 944.702, *F.S.*

³ Some inmates are ineligible for the standardized release orientation program, such as emergency releasees, inmates released to detainers, inmates unable to attend due to mental or medical conditions, inmates in the reception process, inmates who have completed the reception process but cannot complete the course, and inmates who are serving a Florida sentence in another jurisdiction.

⁴ Refer to Rule 33-601.502, *F.A.C.*, for exceptions to this policy, which include any inmate to be released to another jurisdiction for which there is an existing judgment and sentence or detainer. A detainer is a warrant placed against an inmate for pending charges from another jurisdiction.

Findings

Our review of the department's transition services reached the conclusions below.

- While release planning addresses some inmate transition needs, key components are missing.
- The department's reliance on inmate self-study and a high rate of facilitator turnover and lapses in services compromise the effectiveness of its transition preparation course.
- Work release is less expensive than prison and may reduce recidivism. Expanding these services would produce cost savings but must be balanced with increased risk to the public.
- Faith-based transitional housing beds are underutilized and obstacles to utilization should be addressed.
- To improve public safety, the department should provide funding for transitional housing beds for sex offenders.

Release Planning

To facilitate offenders' re-entry into Florida communities, the department prepares a release plan for each offender including a needs assessment to determine which, if any, basic support services he or she needs after release. Prior to release, each offender is given a list of referrals to appropriate community-based providers for services including housing, food, clothing, substance abuse treatment, transportation, secondary education, and/or vocational training.⁵

The department's release planning efforts address most inmate transition needs but lack key components

Release planning is intended to produce an individualized needs assessment of each inmate to determine which, if any, basic support services the inmate needs after release. To this end, in March 2006 the department and

⁵ Section 944.705, *F.S.*

the Department of Children and Families' Office on Homelessness developed guidelines containing 10 key elements for release plans, which include many of the transition requirements outlined in ss. 944.704-944.707, *Florida Statutes*. These guidelines recommend that release plans

- identify a place of residence upon discharge;
- identify transportation needs;
- make aftercare referrals;
- provide medications, clothing, and other basic resources at discharge;
- make pre-release qualifications for Federal benefits;
- provide employment referrals;
- provide personal identification paperwork (valid ID);
- assess risk for homelessness;
- identify individual support networks; and
- provide for post-release follow-up contacts.

The department's current individualized release plans for inmates include most of these elements, including identifying housing, transportation, and medical needs, and providing state employment office referrals. However, the department's release planning process does not meet the guidelines in two key areas—providing inmates with valid state identification upon release and pre-qualification for federal benefits for all potentially eligible inmates. These findings are consistent with those of the Florida Governor's Ex-Offender Task Force.

Valid state identification. The department's transition planning does not provide valid state identification to inmates, which is a key need when leaving prison. Without proper identification, people with criminal records are often unable to find employment, secure housing, or apply for public benefits that may be necessary to obtain medication or other treatment. Currently, the department does not routinely assist inmates with obtaining state identification prior to release and cites several challenges in doing so. These include lacking the computer equipment needed to create

identification cards or the trained personnel to produce them. Also, prison identification is established on the basis of commitment documents rather than on forms of identification that more reliably reflect a person's true name. This results in many inmates being incarcerated under alias names. This has rendered DOC prison ID unacceptable for securing a Florida ID or Social Security card.

To address these concerns, the department has entered into discussions with the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (DHSMV) and developed two options for providing inmates with a state identification upon release. Under the first option, the department would issue Florida IDs to inmates based on existing DHSMV records. Approximately 60% of inmates have had a Florida ID card or driver's license and their automated record remains on file with DHSMV. If the DHSMV record of these persons can be positively linked to given inmates, they would be issued replacement cards. However, this option would not likely meet the requirements of the federal Real ID Act, which will require states to issue federally-approved driver licenses or ID cards. This act, which will likely be implemented in May 2008, will require applicants to provide documentation of their name, date of birth, Social Security number, and principal residence in order to receive a new license or ID card.

Under the second option, the Department of Health would provide birth certificates for inmates when they enter the prison system, which would then enable trained department staff to produce ID cards on equipment provided by DHSMV. This equipment would be provided to each of the department's five reception centers at a cost of \$10,000 per station, \$50,000 per year under a three-year renewable contract. However, the Department of Health currently has access to birth certificates only for the approximately 54% of inmates who were born in Florida. The department has not yet found a solution for

acquiring birth certificates for the remaining inmates who were born outside of the state.

As this option would provide a birth certificate, a primary identification document, it would likely be compliant with Real ID Act requirements. It would also enable inmates to apply for a Social Security card at no cost. Having a Social Security card is necessary for securing federal benefits.

Both proposals would generally require inmates to pay fees of \$3 to \$10 for state IDs and \$9 for birth certificates. However, approximately 25% of the inmate population is indigent and their document fees would need to be paid by the department, unless waived by law. The department also estimates that it would require one additional position at each reception center to manage the process of obtaining documentation and verifying inmate identity.

Pre-qualification for federal benefits. The department currently does not pre-qualify all potentially eligible inmates for federal benefits, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) prior to their release. The application process for these programs can be difficult and time-consuming as extensive documentation is required. For instance, it generally takes three to five months to process claims for disability benefits, which is a considerable delay if the process is not started during the inmate's release planning. Such assistance can ease the transition of these individuals back into the community by enabling them to begin supporting themselves and their dependents without resorting to illicit activities, even if they cannot find work immediately.⁶

Currently, the department provides application assistance services only to inmates who are identified as having a Severe and Persistent Mental Illness as part of a statewide initiative in partnership with the Department of Children and Families. This includes those inmates with psychotic, major depressive, and bi-polar disorders. Between January and July

2006, the department completed applications for 473 released inmates with these diagnoses. The department does not provide this service to an estimated 626 inmates who are released each year who may qualify for federal benefits due to age or physical impairment. Pre-qualifying these additional inmates for federal benefits would not create significant workload. The department reports that it takes staff 2.75 hours and \$1 in postage to process each application; as an average of only two such inmates are released statewide per day the department could likely absorb this workload.

Transition Preparation Course

In addition to receiving a release plan, each inmate released by the department must complete a 100-hour comprehensive transition preparation course that covers topics such as goal setting, family issues, and employment strategies. The course is to be taught by on-site facilitators at all facilities that have a minimum of 20 inmate releases per month. Course facilitators, who are either OPS employees or off-duty correctional officers, are charged with conducting classes, administering pre- and post-tests, answering inmate questions, and ensuring that course delivery is documented and submitted to the project director. Inmates at smaller facilities that do not have facilitators, such as some work, forestry, and road camps, complete workbooks through self-study and in some cases, view transition videos under the supervision of a corrections officer. The department reports that in Fiscal Year 2005-06, the program was allocated \$1.1 million, and over 29,000 inmates completed the course.

Transition course effectiveness may be compromised by self-study model and high facilitator turnover

OPPAGA initially examined the transition course in 2000, when it was conducted at 14 institutions and three work-release centers. Department of Corrections data indicated that the course was effective in reducing inmate

⁶ Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council, Council of State Governments, January 2005.

recidivism by 5.6%.⁷ As a result, we recommended that the Legislature consider increasing funding for this course in order to maximize the long-term cost savings associated with the lower recidivism. The Legislature adopted this recommendation and beginning December 1, 2002, the course was expanded and all inmates being released were required to participate in the program.

However, issues have developed that hinder the course's effectiveness. First, the program delivered to many inmates is materially different from the initial design of the program. As noted in our 2004 report many inmates complete the transition course without a facilitator, and either watch videos or complete course workbooks independently.⁸ The department reports that at least 5,455, or 18.5%, of all released inmates took the course via self-study in Fiscal Year 2005-06, primarily inmates in work release centers, work camps, and other smaller facilities.⁹

The lack of facilitators can reduce course effectiveness as these instructors guide inmates through the material and promote participation and understanding. Facilitators also lead group discussion and question-answer sessions that help inmates understand the materials. This is important as many inmates do not possess the necessary literacy level to independently understand the course materials, which are written at a 7.8 reading grade level; the department reports that over half of inmates admitted into prison during Fiscal Year 2005-06 had sixth grade or lower literacy skills. If inmates cannot understand the materials being presented in the transition course, it will likely have little impact on their behavior and will be unlikely to help reduce recidivism.

To ensure the maximum benefit of the transition preparation course, we recommend that the department reinstate its former policy of requiring that inmates complete the transition course before being transferred to a work release center, road camp, or other facility that lacks transition course facilitators. This would ensure that inmates complete the course as designed.

Second, the department experiences high turnover in its training course facilitators. During Fiscal Year 2005-06, 27 of the 65 transition course facilitator positions experienced a facilitator turnover or started the year with an open position.¹⁰ While department officials were unable to demonstrate how facilitator turnover affected course delivery, it is likely that these vacancies resulted in additional inmates taking the course via self-study.¹¹ The department reports that high turnover is due in part to the fact it uses part-time and OPS positions to staff this function, and individuals often use the position as a stepping stone into a permanent position with benefits.

To address this problem, the department should train additional off-duty correctional officers to serve as transition facilitators at each facility. This would enable other staff to step in and provide training if vacancies occur.¹²

Finally, in 2006, the department developed a revised version of the course workbook and videos. These revised materials condensed some training modules, removed others, and improved the course video material. To ensure that this updated program continues to be effective in helping former inmates readjust to the community and avoid recidivism, the department should study the new curriculum's effectiveness. It should do so by continuing to administer pre- and post-tests to assess whether inmates learn key concepts, whether self-study affects inmate learning, and what effect the

⁷ *Review of the Department of Corrections*, OPPAGA [Report No. 00-23](#), December 2000, revised April 2001.

⁸ *Corrections Education and Rehabilitative Programs Significantly Reduced*, OPPAGA [Report No. 04-59](#), August 2004.

⁹ The department was unable to provide the number of inmates who completed the course through self-study at 13 facilities; 23,684 inmates completed the program with a facilitator while the mode of study for the remaining 209 inmates is unknown.

¹⁰ There were 31 total instances of turnover or vacancies as four positions turned over twice.

¹¹ The turnover or vacancies equaled 2,216 total days, enough time to instruct between 1,860 and 2,325 inmates.

¹² Approximately 65% of part-time facilitators are correctional officers.

current course material has on recidivism compared to the prior course material.

Work Release

Work release is a community transition program authorized by Florida statutes which allows selected incarcerated inmates to work at paid employment in the community within 14 months of their release date.¹³ While these offenders are still inmates, they live in a non-secure facility which operates at a lower cost than state prisons. Work release offers inmates an opportunity to earn and save money prior to release, enhances their employability skills, helps re-establish ties with family and the community, and allows them to participate in self-betterment programs such as Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous. Work release is intended to facilitate the transition of long term inmates back into the community, rather than for those with short sentences who still have ties to the community.

The average inmate in this program earns \$8.15 an hour and works 35 hours a week, with a net weekly pay of \$240 after taxes.¹⁴ Inmates are billed for their room and board and victim restitution, and they must contribute to a savings account. To ensure public safety, statutes prohibit certain inmates from participating in work release, including some types of sex offenders, and persons with prior escape attempts, detainers, or four or more prior incarcerations.¹⁵ Department rules and procedures further restrict eligibility. For example, inmates with poor institutional adjustment or certain offense and arrest histories are deemed to pose too high a risk to be placed in work release.

During 2006, there were 2,997 work release beds in 29 centers throughout the state. Approximately 71% of these beds were operated by the department, while the remaining 864 beds were contracted to private providers at 9 sites. Due to releases from custody, terminations from the program, and medical issues requiring inmates' return to major institutions, 8,444 inmates participated in work release throughout the year, or an average of 2.82 inmates per work release bed.¹⁶ On June 30, 2006, the program served approximately 3.3% of the prison population.

Work release benefits inmate transition, but has public safety risks

Work release provides advantages to both the state and offenders. It allows inmates to gain work experience, is less expensive than institutional housing, and has been shown to lower recidivism. In Fiscal Year 2005-06, the most recent data available, it cost \$52.70 per day to house an inmate in a major institution (not including work release). The net per diem cost in Fiscal Year 2005-06 to house an inmate at a department work release center is \$26.16 and the net per diem cost at a contracted work release center is \$19.74. Per department policy, 45% of a work release inmate's pay goes to reimbursing the state or contracted provider for room and board, helping reduce the cost of a work release bed. The department reports that inmates who are released from a work release center are 5% less likely to recidivate than comparable offenders in the state prison system.

These benefits must be balanced with the risk to the community. Work release inmates are housed in non-secure facilities that are intentionally located in urban areas with suitable job markets. Inmates move about in the community for employment and use public transportation. Although inmates are carefully screened and must meet stringent criteria, some inmates on work release commit new crimes. As shown in Exhibit 1, from July 2002

¹³ Section 945.091, *F.S.*, mandates that an inmate may participate in paid employment only during the last 36 months of his or her confinement. DOC eligibility criteria is within 14 months of release date.

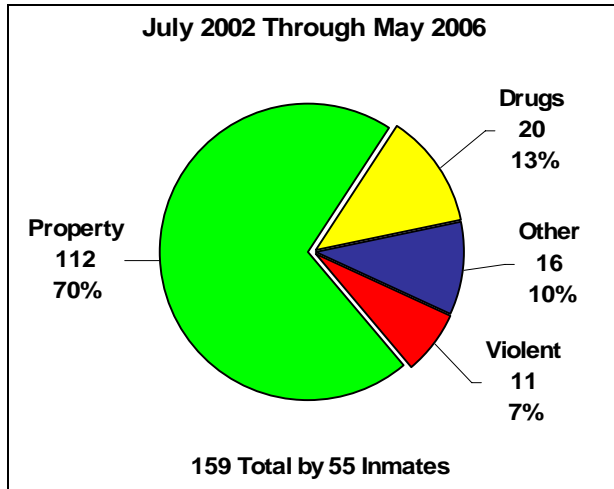
¹⁴ DOC work release center inmates earn an average of \$7.89 while contract work release center inmates average \$8.72.

¹⁵ A detainer is a warrant placed against an inmate for pending charges from another jurisdiction. These pending charge(s) are usually from Florida counties and/or out-of-state law enforcement agencies.

¹⁶ *Community Work Release*, Florida Department of Corrections, January 8, 2007, page 15.

through May 2006 there were 159 total crimes committed by 55 inmates on work release.

**Exhibit 1
Crimes Committed by Inmates While on Work Release or Following Escape From Work Release**



Source: Department of Corrections.

Department data shows that escapes from work release centers account for nearly all escapes from department facilities. During Fiscal Year 2005-06, there were 122 escapes from department facilities, with 120 of these escapes occurring at department and contracted provider work release centers. However, 96 escapees were recaptured within the fiscal year, with 60 of that total being recaptured within 24 hours.

The department should reexamine its assumptions for work release expansion

Recent studies of the department’s transition services suggest that work release could be expanded to improve inmate employability and free up secure prison beds. A key issue is how to expand the program while balancing public safety concerns. While these studies have suggested an aggressive increase in work release is appropriate, the department has proposed a more cautious approach to program expansion. However, the department’s proposals are problematic for three reasons. First, its estimate of eligible work release inmates is not based on offender risk. Second, the department could improve its

use of inmate resources to free up more inmates for work release. Third, the department contends that secure prison beds must accompany any expansion of contracted work release beds, thus diminishing its cost-effectiveness.

Work release capacity is not based on inmate risk classification. In its study of the work release program, the department reports that its ideal work release capacity approaches 4% of the total prison population.¹⁷ Approximately 3.3% of the inmate population is currently participating in work release. The department projects increasing the number of inmates on work release to 3.91% by June 30, 2007. This would raise the number of beds from 2,997 to 3,587. Since the department has set their capacity as a percentage, as the overall inmate population increases so will the number on work release.

According to the department, the 4% capacity figure was based on historical data which showed that when the department maintained approximately 4% of the population in work release (it has been as high as 6% to 7%), the escape rate also decreased. However, setting the program capacity as a percentage of the inmate population does not directly take into account the risk posed by different segments of the offender population. The appropriateness of a fixed 4% cap assumes that the risk profile of the inmate population is unchanged over time, yet the population is greatly affected by sentencing trends. A more appropriate approach would be to base capacity on the results of inmate screening. Inmate risk levels range from maximum (deemed to pose a high risk to the public) to community custody (deemed to pose a low risk). This approach would provide a more objective and defensible standard for projecting work release capacity needs while balancing public safety concerns.

In addition, department staff conceded that in the past when the work release population was a higher percentage of the prison population, the screening process was less effective than

¹⁷ *Community Work Release*, Florida Department of Corrections, January 8, 2007, p 14.

current practices. For example, during the 1980s, inmates were placed directly into work release from reception centers.¹⁸ This practice did not give staff the opportunity to observe inmates' behavior to determine whether or not they would pose a threat to public safety. Currently, inmates must be in the department's custody for at least 60 days prior to being placed in work release.¹⁹ These inmates must have at least six months remaining to serve on their sentences.

In addition to the 4% cap on capacity, the department places further restrictions on work release by limiting participation to inmates who are within 14 months of release. This is substantially more restrictive than Florida law, which permits the department to place offenders in paid employment during the last 36 months of confinement. The department could expand the pool of potentially eligible offenders by adopting the standard in state law. The department explains its policy by stating that offenders with more time left on their sentences are higher escape risks. However, it lacks data to substantiate this determination. While some offenders may pose such a risk, assignment to work release should be based on an overall assessment of their risk rather than the length of their remaining sentences.

The department could expand work release by shifting inmate resources. One of the department's arguments for limiting the expansion of work release is the lack of available work release eligible offenders to send into the community. However, as of December 2006, there were nearly 7,000 community custody inmates eligible for work release to fill the nearly 3,000 work release beds available at any given time. The problem is that many of these inmates are assigned to other activities. For example, more than one-third were assigned to outside work including state facility maintenance and public work squads. Another one-third were in rehabilitative programs or temporarily

unassigned. While these assignments make good use of inmate resources, the remaining 28% of community or minimum custody inmates were assigned to activities inside the fence, such as inside grounds maintenance and food service rather than outside the fence gaining work experience. Inside work activities should be performed by higher risk inmates unable to work outside the fence. As of December 2006, there were almost 30,000 medium custody inmates, many of whom would be available to perform these internal job assignments. According to the department, while some jobs within a facility, such as medical orderlies, education clerks, and chaplain's aides, should be filled by a minimum custody inmate, many jobs can be filled by medium custody inmates with little or no impact on facilities. The use of medium custody inmates would allow the department to send additional inmates to work release and help reduce inmate idleness by providing those on medium or close custody with additional available work assignments.

The department's limit on contracted work release beds appears unreasonable. The department limits contract work release facilities to no more than 1.5% of the total inmate population. This is based on concern that should a contract work release center fail or should a serious incident occur, the department would need sufficient secure bed capacity to return all work release offenders at that location to prison. According to department staff, since the inception of contracted work release facilities in the 1970s, it has contracted for 27 separate work release facilities. During this time, only one provider, who managed three centers, was replaced due to performance problems, and a new provider was in place within days. There was no disruption of placements at the facility.

While it is reasonable for the department to maintain some open secure beds to allow for reincarceration of work release inmates who violate program rules, the requirement to maintain a secure bed for each contracted work release bed may diminish the cost-effectiveness

¹⁸ *Community Work Release*, Florida Department of Corrections, January 8, 2007, p 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, page 8.

of the program and limit the state’s ability to expand work release.

Transitional Housing

Of the 32,651 unduplicated inmate releases in Fiscal Year 2005-06, 21% (6,899) indicated a need for housing assistance on their needs assessment form during release planning. The department offers temporary transitional housing to released offenders who need a structured environment to promote their recovery from substance abuse. Prior to or within 90 days of release from incarceration, an inmate may apply for placement at a contracted secular or faith-based substance abuse transitional housing program. Participants are not required to be under department supervision and may stay up to a maximum of six months in secular or one year in faith-based housing. Both programs are voluntary and provide furnished temporary housing as well as services including job placement assistance and substance abuse support.

Offenders are placed into both types of transitional housing based on the availability of a bed, the facility’s willingness to accept the individual based on their criminal history, and the offenders’ willingness to follow program rules. All transitional housing residents are required to participate in program activities and abide by program rules. However, faith-based participants may not be discharged for failure to participate in the faith-based components of the program.

For Fiscal Year 2005-06 the faith-based program was allocated \$1,460,000 and the secular program was allocated \$400,000. For both programs, the average contracted bed rate was \$20 per occupied bed, per day.

Transitional housing beds have a number of benefits, but faith-based beds are underutilized

Transitional housing has a number of benefits, including providing a transition between the secure, structured, and monitored environment of incarceration and life in the

community; enabling released inmates to keep their living expenses low while they transition to the workforce; and helping reduce recidivism. Department studies have found that, within two years of exiting the program, faith-based participants and secular participants had 14.6% and 11.2% recommitment rates, respectively, for new offenses, which is lower than the department’s overall 17.3% recommitment rate.

**Exhibit 2
For Fiscal Year 2005-06, Faith-Based Transitional Housing Utilization Was Low**

Type	Beds	Participants	Utilization Rate	Funding Allocated
Secular	54	229	96%	\$400,000
Faith-Based	307 to 331	870	49% to 61%	\$1,460,000

Source: Department of Corrections.

However, faith-based transitional housing beds are substantially underutilized. During Fiscal Year 2005-06, the percentage of these beds used by inmates ranged from 49% to 61%. In contrast, the 54 secular program beds had a 96% utilization rate during the same time period.

According to a department survey of release officers, several obstacles may hinder utilization of the faith-based transition beds. These include that the beds are not available in desired locations, and inmates declined to participate in these facilities due to restrictive program rules, such as prohibitions on outside contact for the first 30 days, no alcohol or drug use, and required active participation in program classes. Also, the programs do not accept sex offenders and some violent offenders, and there can be timing problems in which providers may not be able to guarantee a bed on a future date projected for the inmate’s release. The department further observed that offender involvement in faith-based transitional housing is voluntary and that many offenders lack the desire for additional structure after spending time in prison.

The department should take steps to address these obstacles, such as helping to coordinate inmate release and placement to resolve timing problems. The department should also determine if transitional housing programs are located in areas of greatest need, and if necessary, initiate new contracts with program providers located in high-need areas.

Sex offenders are unable to utilize transitional housing beds

Sex offenders are one of most difficult populations to transition into society. Apart from the public’s aversion to these persons, state and local government residency restrictions prevent many sex offenders from residing within a specified distance from schools, parks, playgrounds, and other areas where children congregate. As the department is required to identify a housing placement for supervised sex offenders prior to their release, some of these persons are retained at prisons after their sentences are completed until suitable placements can be found, which increases state costs.

Current transitional housing providers do not serve sex offenders. While departmental policy does not restrict any class of offenders from transitional housing, contracted providers have their own admission criteria and are authorized to prohibit selected offenders from admission to their programs. In addition, providers may be unable to house these offenders if their facilities are located in areas where county, city, and state ordinances prohibit sex offenders from residing. As of December 2006, the department indicated that no transitional housing facility accepted sex offenders.

There are a number of advantages to creating transitional housing programs for sex offenders. First, the programs may reduce homelessness among this population, which makes it more difficult for local law enforcement agencies to monitor these persons. While the number of homeless sex offenders is unknown, 336 of the 1,592 sex offenders (21%) released during Fiscal Year 2005-06 reported a need for housing assistance.

Second, the structured environment of transitional housing would benefit sex offender oversight. Transitional housing programs typically prohibit sexually explicit materials, require strict curfews, require participants to have a roommate or sponsor, and restrict participants from leaving the property unattended. This structure would provide additional oversight and could help limit sex offenders’ opportunity to offend again.

These programs could be created in two ways: by using the funding for faith-based transitional housing, or by converting unused correctional employee housing at prisons to sex offender housing.²⁰ In Fiscal Year 2005-06, 39% to 51% of available faith-based transitional housing was not used. Should the department be unable to increase participation in these beds, it would be feasible to reallocate these resources to fund new transitional housing programs for sex offenders. The department would need to identify providers willing to serve this population and who are located in areas that do not violate sex offender residency restrictions. The department has also discussed creating temporary sex-offender housing on the grounds of some correctional institutions. This on-site housing is located outside of the perimeter of prisons and could be used by offenders who have completed their sentences but have not yet found permanent housing. As of April 2006, the most recent data available, 25% of on-site employee housing was unoccupied. This vacant housing included 54 bachelor officers’ quarters, 374 mobile home pads, and six state-owned mobile homes. As these units are located at correction sites, they would provide a more easily monitored living environment for this population that is of particular concern to public safety. However, it should be noted that some sites would not be appropriate, such as those where children are living in staff housing, and provisions may need to be made during family visitation periods when children are on facility grounds. Department staff also

²⁰ The department allocated funds for faith-based transitional housing from a \$2.92 million faith-based and transitional services appropriation.

noted that many prisons are located in rural areas, which could make it more difficult for offenders to obtain work and attend treatment programs.

Conclusions

Transition services can help improve public safety and achieve cost savings by reducing recidivism by inmates who otherwise may not be prepared to re-enter society. However, the department's current transition programs are limited and should be modified to improve their effectiveness.

Accordingly, we recommend that the department

- formalize agreements with the Florida Department of Health and the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles to provide inmates with valid state IDs upon release and
- expand its efforts in pre-qualifying aged or physically impaired inmates for federal benefits.

To insure the effectiveness of its transition preparation course, we recommend that the department

- reinstate its former policy to require inmates to complete the 100-hour transition program before being transferred to a work release center or work camp and
- expand the pool of transition facilitators available at each facility to improve retention rates and avoid disruptions in transition program delivery.

To maintain the public safety and maximize the cost savings associated with work release, we recommend that the department

- base work release program capacity on inmate risk, such as custody level, and
- expand work release by shifting inmate resources.

To improve utilization of faith-based transitional housing beds, we recommend that the department address the identified obstacles to bed use, including

- ensuring that inmates are able to get timely pre-approval by coordinating inmate release and placement and
- determining if transitional housing programs are located in areas of greatest need, and if necessary, initiating new program contracts in high-need areas.

To address public safety and provide additional oversight, we recommend that the department develop funding proposals for sex offender-specific transitional housing. Additionally, the department should assess the cost and benefits of adding such a program.

Agency Response

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.51(5), *Florida Statutes*, a draft of our report was submitted to the Secretary of the Department of Corrections for review and response. The Chief of Staff's written response is reproduced in its entirety in Appendix A.

OPPAGA supports the Florida Legislature by providing evaluative research and objective analyses to promote government accountability and the efficient and effective use of public resources. This project was conducted in accordance with applicable evaluation standards. Copies of this report in print or alternate accessible format may be obtained by telephone (850/488-0021 or 800/531-2477), by FAX (850/487-3804), in person, or by mail (OPPAGA Report Production, Claude Pepper Building, Room 312, 111 W. Madison St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475). Cover photo by Mark Foley.

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Appendix A



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Government Accountability (OPPAGA)
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111 West Madison Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1475

Dear Director VanLandingham:

Thank you for the opportunity to review OPPAGA's draft report on the Department's transition services that prepares inmates for release to the community. The Department concurs with the recommendations contained in the report with one exception. With regard to the expansion of work release program capacity, the Department stands by the risk assessment system of classifying inmates for work release and the options for expansion as outlined in the "Community Work Release" document issued by the Department in January 2007. As the OPPAGA report acknowledges, any expansion of work release capacity has to be cognizant of and address the additional risk to public safety; the Department's options for expansion does just that.

Work release beds have their place in the correctional system, but there exist other options to more cost effectively house the increased inmate population. For example, the Department is currently looking at a model that combines the work release and work camp configuration. Such beds are cheaper to build and operate than within a regular prison, and these beds are still behind a secure perimeter.

Regardless, the Department stands ready to assist OPPAGA and the Legislature in analyzing and evaluating options to address the projected increases in the inmate population whilst preserving public safety. Again thank you for the opportunity to work with your staff on this report and we look forward to working with you and the Legislature in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard Prudom".

Richard Prudom,
Chief of Staff