

The New York Times

Copyright 2005 The New York Times Company

June 26, 2005 Sunday

By Kate Zernike

Andre Willis started selling cocaine and heroin when he was 14, and by 25 had been sent to prison four times. Each time he got out he vowed to look for an honest job. But employers did not want to hire an ex-convict, so he would give up after two months and go back to selling drugs and smoking marijuana.

The fourth time the state offered a different kind of sentence: a year at a new state prison dedicated solely to drug treatment, where Mr. Willis was given job training and addiction counseling that has continued into his parole.

When he got out of prison in late 2004, his parole officer and treatment counselor helped him find a halfway house to live in, away from the patterns of his old neighborhood. And they watched as he went door-to-door for three months until he found a job at a food market. "It's not the job I want," says Mr. Willis, who turns 27 next month, "but it's a job."

Faced with a record 40,000 inmates coming out of prison this year, as well as record rates of recidivism, Illinois has put the new prison -- the Sheridan Correctional Center -- at the center of a plan, closely watched by other states, to prevent repeat offenders from returning.

Opened 18 months ago in a previously shuttered prison in Sheridan, Ill., 70 miles southwest of here, the facility will soon be the nation's largest prison dedicated to drug treatment, a recognition by the state that drug addiction is a major reason inmates are ending up back behind bars. Sixty-nine percent of all inmates are in prison on drug-related crimes.

Across the country, more than 600,000 prisoners are released each year, and about two-thirds return to prison within three years, according to the Justice Department. About 70 percent have drug or alcohol problems, and about 40 percent return to prison because of drug violations.

With prison costs rising and budgets tightening, even states that had embraced tough law-and-order approaches are now trying to smooth re-entry to break the cycle of repeat offenses. Illinois officials say even small declines in the recidivism rate would save them money in the long term because right now, statewide, 55 percent of all prisoners return within three years, and 80 percent are rearrested.

The Sheridan program, a project of Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich, who campaigned in 2002 on a promise to reduce recidivism, costs about \$35 million a year to run. With new construction, it is expected to grow to 1,300 beds, serving about 1,700 prisoners each year.

Promising early results at Sheridan have made it something of a model. Corrections officials from Kentucky and Louisiana have visited. And here in the Midwest, where a surge in methamphetamine use has officials desperate for any possible remedy, Nebraska and Iowa are studying whether to dedicate facilities to drug treatment.

About a dozen drug treatment prisons exist across the country, but most focus on first-time offenders. Sheridan is rare because it is a medium-security prison where most of the inmates are repeat offenders convicted of serious crimes. It is also unusual for the services it offers after release.

The state has added 100 parole agents, for a total of 440, to allow agents to work more closely with former felons, and has also assigned drug treatment counselors to all Sheridan parolees, to help them find jobs and housing, and to obtain ID like a driver's license -- services often not available to former felons.

Illinois has opened seven re-entry centers across the state where some parolees check in daily for drug testing and others come for job and treatment support.

And for the first time, state officials have formally worked with local groups in Chicago that have set up drug addiction support groups and bought buildings that are being rehabilitated to provide housing for former offenders. One group even took two busloads of local residents to visit Sheridan to remind them that its inmates were their once and future neighbors.

"These people are coming home; they're going to be behind you in line at the Wal-Mart," said the warden at Sheridan, Michael Rothwell. "Not to help them is folly."

The state screens inmates to determine whom to send to Sheridan; prisoners must be serving terms of 6 to 24 months and have to volunteer for the program. Murderers, sex offenders and those with severe mental illness are not allowed.

The average inmate at Sheridan has been arrested 16 times, convicted 5 times and sent to prison 3 times. The prisoners divide about evenly between users of heroin, cocaine, marijuana and alcohol, and 52 percent said they had taken more than one drug daily. About half had not been employed before prison, and more than half had no high school diploma.

Prison officials say Sheridan inmates begin preparing to leave the day they arrive at the prison, set on 270 acres surrounded by cornfields. Inmates spend their time in group therapy, drug counseling, and classes or job training, which is mandatory.

Mr. Rothwell, the warden, arranged for the National Association of Home Builders to teach construction trades. The Illinois Manufacturers' Association, facing a wave of retirement among workers who make spring wires, asked to set up a program as well and has hired hundreds of graduates, said John Bitowt, who trains the prisoners.

Ordinarily, Mr. Bitowt said, the metal instruments the men work with might be seen as potential weapons. "I feel I can trust them," he said. "They've earned it." The men are searched and tested

for drugs, and sent back to a regular prison if found to be involved in gang recruitment or violence; 800 have completed Sheridan, and about 250 have been expelled.

The prison tries to build trust, responsibility and some measure of independence. The inmates move in small groups without guards to escort them, although cameras track their movements. As a result, Sheridan looks more like the boys' reform school it once was than a prison.

Most prisons release inmates with a small amount of money and sometimes clean clothes; at Sheridan, inmates meet with parole officers 30 days before they leave and are assigned a drug counselor to work with them after release.

Among the first 150 graduates of Sheridan, said David E. Olson, a professor at Loyola University Chicago who has tracked the program, 27 percent were arrested within nine months of release, compared with 46 percent of a group of inmates of other institutions with similar backgrounds and drug use. Ten percent of the Sheridan graduates returned to prison within that time, compared with 27 percent of the other sample.

Officials in more rural Midwestern states say that as methamphetamine continues to devastate families and small towns, public support is shifting toward treatment.

"I cannot go to a restaurant or a department store without running into someone whose niece or daughter or friend is on meth," said Marvin Van Haaften, the drug policy adviser to Gov. Tom Vilsack of Iowa. "Suddenly people are a little more open. They realize these aren't child molesters, they are sons and daughters who have gotten hooked on meth." Mr. Van Haaften is considering proposals to turn a state jail into a treatment center.

Some Sheridan parolees have resented the follow-up, but success depends largely on motivation. Reginald Banks, 38, had been through drug treatment in his previous prison stays when he arrived at Sheridan in January 2004.

"When I got out I'd just get myself a bag," Mr. Banks said. "I knew it wasn't going to work." That changed after his last arrest for dealing drugs, when his 5-year-old son told him, "That's all you do, is stay in trouble."

At Sheridan, Mr. Banks said, he learned "there are more important things than being on the corner."

"What's important to me," he said, "is being home with my son, rather than just having him accept my phone calls."