

PRISON ALTERNATIVES

“Law enforcement agencies to be challenged when 6,000 criminals are sent back to Thomes County,” scrolled the headline of the on-line Susanna Tribune on February 20, 2030.

The state prison is severely overcrowded. According to Governor Sidney, the state does not have the funding to build a new prison or to continue warehousing so many prisoners. The state legislature has mandated that a large number of nonviolent offenders will be sent to local communities to complete their prison terms in prison alternatives programs.

The Thomes County justice system has to prepare to receive 6,000 offenders. Starting July 1, 2030, groups of approximately 500 offenders will be released into the county to be absorbed into the prison alternatives program. While violent crimes have decreased, “white collar” crime has increased. This is due, in large part, to the amount of Internet crimes. Computers and high-speed, low-cost Internet connections are an integral part of everyone’s lives. Easy access has created an attractive environment for compu-thugs on the information highway. More typical crimes are prevalent, too, such as burglary, drug use, and fraud. Even though most people use electronic money, inventive criminals have devised many new ways to defraud the public.

The existing prison alternatives programs in Thomes County are small, pilot programs supervised by a small number of dedicated people. Program management and coordination between agencies has been informal because of the small number of offenders involved. The Thomes County Correctional Services Task Force has just been formed to develop a new prison alternative plan. The Task Force is responsible for developing a program that will integrate the efforts of all the agencies and organizations into a system that will protect both the public and the offenders. Also, they hope their plan will be effective in rehabilitating offenders. Many more groups will be involved in the new effort.

Members of the Task Force represent the groups that work with convicted criminals. These are the local police and county sheriff departments, the FBI, and the probation and parole board. Other members represent medical and mental health organizations that help in the rehabilitation of offenders. People who work with the Criminal Information Network are on the Task Force to provide technical computer advice. There are also representatives of the community volunteer organizations that provide employment for offenders assigned to community service. Educators from the high schools and the local community college serve on the Task Force, too.

The Task Force is considering several prison alternatives including those that place low-risk offenders in a wide variety of community service programs. The high-risk offenders will serve their sentences in house arrest and intensive supervision programs. The technologies available include electronic bracelets, and the recently developed microchip tracking system. The microchips identify the location of an offender. These also respond to the changes in body chemistry produced by anger and drug use. The microchips implanted under a person’s skin. It can be read by both sensors in hand-held units and by FinderSat, a new satellite system. The computerized Criminal Information Network is used to store and retrieve large amounts of information like offenders’ records and FinderSat tracking data.

The Task Force identified some issues at their first meeting. These are a few of them: coordination and accountability among the different groups, screening and placement that considers the needs of offenders and community safety, setting fair and consistent standards for the offenders, and staffing concerns.

The Thomes County Task Force members are aware that your team members are accomplished problem solvers. They ask that you bring your FPSP skills of creative and critical thinking to bear on this situation confronting the Task Force. Please help them identify the various challenges, select one underlying area and develop an action plan that the Task Force can incorporate into the overall effort in Thomes County.