

Engaging faith-based groups next step in criminal justice overhaul

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By [Greg Bluestein](#) - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Gainesville —

The toughest part of Gov. Nathan Deal's criminal justice overhaul depends largely on help from faith-based groups, and the governor has begun an unprecedented outreach to religious organizations to fight stubborn recidivism rates.

Deal wants to institutionalize what has been a largely informal effort to rely on volunteers to mentor and counsel released offenders. But building and sustaining a statewide network won't be easy, and research suggests the work could have mixed results.



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Still, Deal is putting his office's heft behind the effort in hopes it brings lasting changes to recidivism rates that have remained relatively stable despite a long-term increase in corrections spending. It's a long-term effort for a governor who has spent a chunk of his political capital in pursuit of a lasting criminal justice overhaul.

"We need you," Deal said during a Sunday sermon at Gainesville's First Baptist Church, his house of worship since the 1960s. "We need you to set an example — to welcome, to assist, to provide and to make sure that those who are willing to change the directions of their lives will find a helping hand."

The third leg

Georgia politics news

Deal, a former prosecutor, is among a movement of Republican governors rethinking the tough-on-crime policies of the 1980s and 1990s that led to rising rates of imprisonment — and surging costs for the corrections system.

The first stage of his overhaul allowed Georgia to divert more nonviolent offenders toward alternative programs and away from prisons, while legislation he signed last year aimed to keep younger drug offenders out of juvenile lockups.

The third effort, aimed at smoothing the return to society for released inmates, is seen as the toughest challenge. Deal signed legislation this year that prods the Department of Corrections to create a new treatment program for released offenders struggling with their transition and plans to sign an executive order to remove the question about felony convictions from most state employment applications.

But state leaders have long acknowledged a more nuanced approach is needed to target stubborn recidivism rates. A 2011 study by the Pew Center on the States found that more than 34 percent of Georgia's ex-cons wound up back in prison within three years, a rate that had barely budged despite a corrections budget that reached \$1.2 billion.

It put Georgia in the middle of the pack, behind states such as California and Minnesota where the rates topped 50 percent but below Wyoming and Oregon, where rates hovered below 25 percent.

Deal's long-term plan to reduce the rates hinges on religious groups. He recruited an Interfaith Council in April to advise him on how to reduce recidivism rates, and the group met in June at a forum at a Middle Georgia corrections facility to listen to experts analyze strategies and hear from released offenders about their challenges.

His office created a network, called Healing Communities of Georgia, to work with religious congregations to reduce recidivism. The group will work with an office Deal created last year that focuses on supporting released inmates as they re-enter society.

Deal is essentially formalizing an ad hoc network of faith-based volunteers who work to reduce recidivism, said Pat Nolan, the director of the American Conservative Union's Center for Criminal Justice Reform. Nolan said he only knows of one other state that has embraced a similar program. In Kansas, a program matching inmates with volunteer mentors is seen as a way to reduce that state's 43 percent recidivism rate.

"Georgia's trying to do it systematically, to tap into the wealth of passionate people in the community," Nolan said. "They can't replace the government groups, but they can certainly supplement them."

Mixed results

Academic studies show the immediate benefits and long-term questions surrounding the programs.

In Minnesota, [an analysis by state prison officials](#) showed a faith-based program called InnerChange Freedom Initiative helped reduce the risk of reoffending by more than 25 percent among participants between 2003 and 2009. But the study noted that it only works if volunteers are well-versed through training in “effective correctional programming,” such as mentoring and teaching job skills.

Other analyses have questioned whether faith-based programs work better than well-funded secular programs.

A 2006 Florida State University study found there’s little evidence that faith-based prisoner re-entry programs actually work, though it concluded that mentoring and other services can fill vacuums amid cost-cutting at corrections facilities.

And faith-based programs could be seen as more effective simply because they offer more benefits. Rebecca Sager, a Loyola Marymount University professor who studies faith-based prison initiatives, cites an Iowa program operating out of a local prison that attracted more participants by offering perks such as pizza and movies that other inmates were denied.

Nolan, for his part, said the nationwide results speak for themselves. Often, he said, these mentors take on intensely personal tasks, such as intervening in arguments with released offenders’ employers or tracking them down if they stray.

“It’s messy work getting involved in the lives of those who have struggled,” Nolan said. “And in many cases they go where government workers cannot.”

A long to-do list

Deacon Richard Tolcher, a member of Deal’s Interfaith Council, knows the group has a tough task ahead trying to lay the framework for a statewide effort. But he also hopes the members can influence more minute policy changes, such as clearing the way for inmates to get driver’s licenses and business certificates before their release.

“There are some big roadblocks for these guys, and we can do a better job handling them,” said Tolcher, who directs the prison and jail ministry for Atlanta’s Catholic Archdiocese, which serves an area that includes 22 prisons and more than 70 jails. “Sometimes they get out and they don’t have the tools to survive so they go back to their old ways.”

Deal’s deputies are glad for the help. Avery Niles, who heads the state Juvenile Justice Department, said faith-based programs can reduce recidivism rates among juvenile offenders by 10 percent. He said the state is in “desperate need” for more assistance from the religious community.

The governor’s pitch Sunday, meanwhile, seemed equally targeted at the decision makers in the well-heeled audience at the Gainesville church, one of the town’s most prominent congregations. He said a large-scale manufacturer recently inquired about underwriting welding equipment to train inmates so they can leave prison as skilled workers.

“It requires that we open our hearts, that we open our doors and that we open our employment opportunities to those who are trying to make a difference and changing the direction of their lives,” Deal said. “Because that is indeed where the state needs the church.”