

Parole changes may hit county

By Vegar Stokset
For the Oregon Daily Emerald

The parole and probation officer calls the offender Mike. This 32-year-old Lane County resident physically struck down two convenience store clerks recently for a pack of cigarettes.

Mike's drug dependency and unstable temper has for years made him a threat to the safety of community citizens. He has been in and out of state prisons for more than a decade and is currently on parole.

Recently, Mike called a county probation officer and said he had relapsed into drug use. After detoxification, the probation officer searched for possible responses to Mike's relapse.

In the near future, Mike may be one of the 500 offenders who could be treated annually through a proposed day reporting center program in Eugene.

"A day reporting center would provide intensified supervision and reintegration services for parolees and probation violators," said Donna Lattin, a Lane County corrections adviser. "This way, we hope to reduce the recycling of criminals in the justice system."

Instead of sending people like Mike back to jail, they would be required to report in on a daily basis to a case manager who would make sure that each individual follows conditions of supervision and gets proper treatment.

In addition, to enhance supervision, Lattin said the center could make a range of services available to help the offender out of the cycle of addiction and crime.

Daily sessions would make the offenders better prepared to stay straight and learn new skills. This includes classes in life skills, mental health, job readiness, and alcohol and drug treatment.

The aim is to respond more efficiently to offenders that would otherwise keep engaging in crimes, thereby reducing the need for imprisonment. State officials say that the probation and parole violators traditionally occupy more than half of the prison beds.

"In this budget crunch, we need to come up with different ways of dealing with offenders without compromising public safety," said Joanne Fuller, executive manager at the state department of corrections.

The state plans to shift the limited resources from lower-risk to higher-risk offenders, reduce the number of offenders on supervision by 50 percent, and spend more on community-based corrections, including day reporting centers.

Although the concept of a day reporting center is generally accepted among local corrections officials, the state's plan to consequently reduce supervision of offenders is harder to swallow.

John H. Nilsen, a Lane County parole and branch officer, called the state's plan a "gamble with public safety, and an abandonment of the good work we have started."

If the state proposal is passed by the Legislature in June, Lane County will have to drop supervision of about 1,500 of its 2,900 offenders currently on probation and parole, resulting in a loss of its 42 parole and probation officers.

Nilsen said he felt betrayed by the proposal, which would end a wide array of services that parole and probation clients currently receive from the officers. A large group of unstable offenders would be left without anyone to hold them accountable, he said.

"Our officers are doing some very crucial work monitoring and meeting the needs of the parolees

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— Dave Koch,
branch manager for parole and corrections

and probationers," Nilsen said. "It would be a mess if those services were taken away."

Nilsen said he supports the idea of a day reporting center, but he does not believe it is sound policy to lay off probation and parole personnel in order to fund such a program.

"Our local parole and probation office has built up a pool of resources so that we practically function as a day reporting center," Nilsen said. "Rather than duplicating the services in a new location, we could do the job just as well from our localities."

State Circuit Court Judge Kip Leonard agreed with Nilsen that a day reporting center could only be accepted on top of the current level of supervision staff in the county.

"The criminal justice system is dependent on the parole and probation officers," Leonard said. "It would be a disaster to lose them."

The home-visits and the follow-up of the offenders on supervision are crucial factors in the justice process, he said.

"To cut home-visits is to cut the heart out of the supervision programs," Leonard said. Probation and parole officers show up at the offender's home at least six times a year and can detect and report potential violations.

Included in the local program plan, which recently got its initial approval at a Corrections Advisory Committee meeting, is day reporting, newly developed community placement and detention on a secure facility outside of Lane County.

Dave Koch, branch manager for parole and corrections, said he believes the issue of a day reporting center is overplayed.

"The center is almost offered as a do-away with supervision," Koch said. "But the planned center would only handle 30 offenders on a daily basis, representing about 1 percent of the average number of offenders currently in our county."

A major problem in Lane County, Koch said, is that few alternatives to incarceration are available for probation and parole violators. Koch said the county officials believe that those people are the state's problem and they will generally not be admitted into local programs.

Koch said he hopes to see more use of community correctional programs, which are both more humane and cost-effective. The goal must be to match special programs with certain types of offenders in an attempt to break the cycle of crime.

Day reporting centers are part of state policy changes that recognize offenders may be efficiently and effectively treated through means other than a hard cell, Koch said.

A day reporting center is a fairly new innovation in the justice system, Koch said. But he said he strongly believes it is worth a try. The day reporting center in Marion County is too young for researchers to determine the rate of success, but about 12 other states have successfully run day reporting centers for several years, Koch said.

"It is hard to predict the effectiveness of a day reporting center in Eugene," Koch said. "But what we're all about is to figure out the right mixture of supervision, sanctions and treatment."

Guild gives writers critiques of writings

By Katy Moeller
For the Oregon Daily Emerald

Armed with ball point pens and a handful of photocopies, a dozen community poets and fiction writers gather weekly at the New Zone Gallery to hear candid reactions to their latest work.

The Lane Literary Guild organizes the weekly workshops, which are free and open to the public. The workshops attract writers of all ages and caliber, though the current members reflect a middle-aged, well-educated and highly motivated group of writers.

The workshops take place at the New Zone Gallery, a small, quaint gallery located near the Fifth Street Public Market. Though the gallery does not boast soft chairs, cushy couches or even a table to write on, it does serve as a dependable place where writers can meet and discuss their work.

In the past the guild had workshops in which both poetry and fiction were critiqued, but because of the length of the fiction pieces, a separate fiction workshop was formed.

In general, about a half-dozen people attend the poetry workshops. The format is friendly and informal, with the group discussion led by Craig Gilbert. Gilbert, a financial planner by profession, said he enjoys nurturing his writing on the side.

The group critiques poems that are handed out in the workshop the week before. This allows for time to read, reread and write comments. Some write tedious notes in the margins, which cover as much space as the work itself.

The author of a poem usually reads it aloud to the group, providing a greater understanding of the intended voice and tone. And then, silence.

Eyebrows arch and distort in thoughtful contemplation. After a couple of minutes, there is a shuffling of papers and a shifting in seats. Often there are smirks and smiles reflecting delight at a clever idea or turn of phrase. Sometimes there are just blank stares.

"As a poem, it's too judgmental. Men are s--- and this is how they are. Then again it could just be my perceptions," said Richard Reed, pointedly responding to a poem.

"I feel the exact opposite. I didn't get that at all. I had a very warm and positive experience," Bjo Ashwill said.

The author of the as yet untitled poem, Kathryn Steadman, appreciated both comments. In fact, she likes the feedback given by group members.

"I like the group the way it is. People are honest. Their first concern is the poem and improving it," she said.

Steadman, a mother of three and full-time student at Lane Community College, hopes one day to publish a book of poetry. Her poetry, which is held in high regard by members of the group, has been published in *Denali*, a collection of writing produced at Lane, and *Fireweed*, a book of western Oregon poetry.

One of the editors of *Fireweed*, Erik Muller, is also a member of the poetry workshop. Muller, a guiding light for the guild for the past few years, has taught writing for 27 years, including seven years at Lane Community College. He said he moved to Eugene from Coos Bay so that he could meet other writers.

The fiction workshop, which has met only three times, is in the process of building a core group of dedicated writers.

The "reluctant coordinator," as Sylvia Wright calls herself, believes the separation from the poetry workshop was necessary to adequately critique the longer pieces.

Only one University student regularly attends the fiction workshop.

Brian Wittenbrook, a post-baccalaureate student in psychology, brings his short stories to the group to be critiqued. Although he said writing can be quite a challenge, Wittenbrook hopes to produce a novel some day.

"I think of stories a lot. It's hard to write, though. It's a bit of a force to get stuff down," he said.

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