

# East County meeting on release of inmates leaves many frustrated

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PITTSBURG — Several people expressed frustration that a public forum this week to discuss the early release of California prison inmates failed to provide the answers they wanted.

Attendees questioned the meeting's focus after Fred Haywood, a regional administrator for California's parole system, was unable to say how many early release parolees could be sent home to East Contra Costa in coming years. The forum drew about 70 people to Los Medanos College.

As many as 40,000 state prisoners considered low risk are expected to be released early over the next several years as part of legislation aimed at saving money and easing prison overcrowding and health care problems.

But instead of discussing the early release program, a handful of representatives from state and county corrections agencies, as well as leaders of a couple of parole-focused nonprofit groups, described current methods of integrating existing parolees into their communities.

However, Haywood said that "our most successful

programs are not in Contra Costa County," calling that "regrettable."

Although the legislators promised to keep dangerous felons behind bars, The Associated Press reported in April that violent offenders have been among those released from some county jails as part of the program, though Contra Costa wasn't studied.

Wednesday's "Early Inmate Release" forum was organized by Contra Costa County Supervisor Federal Glover, who has

formed a task force with Supervisor John Gioia to address the effects of early release on the east and west ends of the county.

According to figures provided by the state Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, about 500 parolees are living in East Contra Costa, with most in Antioch (222) and Pittsburg (152). The county's recidivism rate for parolees is near 70 percent.

Rodney Gray, administrator of the parole division's program development unit, said NIMBY-ism ("Not in my backyard") plays a big role in why Contra Costa lacks many parole services. Many residents fear that parolees will embrace old habits once they're back in the environment where they first committed crimes.

But that fear is most often realized when the resources to integrate parolees don't exist, parole officials said. Furthermore, they said parolees should not be stigmatized — that they are former residents returning home after serving their debt to society.

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"They don't have antlers," said David Fraser, Glover's chief of staff. "They are human beings."

One meeting attendee, who said he had been incarcerated from age 13 to 18 but had turned his life around since, argued that programs aimed at adult parolees come too late — that intervention has to occur before adulthood if it is to be effective.

"You're waiting too long," said Darrell Gospel, 33, of Pittsburg.

In recent months, the task force of county officials and others in the corrections and nonprofit arenas has started to develop a strategic plan to coordinate existing services and address gaps, Fraser said.

That plan eventually will be adopted by supervisors to implement countywide. Glover said the hope is that funding to put it in action will become available.

San Francisco and San Mateo are among the other Bay Area counties that have taken a similar tack, pooling local resources to fight recidivism. Richmond also has a similar network of re-entry programs that work with the city.

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