

Beacon Hill Byline by Rep. Mary Rogeness

December 11, 2003

“Helping them get out and stay out”

The last time I wrote “Get out and stay out,” I was writing about fire safety. This week’s byline has a very different topic, but the words again seem appropriate. I spent the morning touring the Hampden County House of Correction, and the overriding purpose conveyed by the actions of the staff is their commitment to seeing the inmates learn enough from their experience that after they get out of the facility they will stay out of the correctional system.

It was a real learning experience for me. It started when Sheriff Michael Ashe wrote a letter inviting me to see the jail. My previous visit to the Stony Brook facility came at the 1992 open house for the brand new jail, and I was interested in seeing how it had fared after a dozen years of use. At the same time, I will admit to being hesitant to tour in the midst of the 1700 inmates. Curiosity won out, and we scheduled the tour.

In quick succession we toured the orientation, short sentence areas. And women’s “pods.” Then came the school and work facility, where we stopped in at the print shop, classrooms and prison industry floor.

These are my impressions of the morning’s activities.

First is the physical plant. It is very much like it looked when it was brand new. The grounds looked even better than opening day, with a manicured lawn that would be the envy of any homeowner.

Second is the sheriff’s philosophy of corrections. Every activity is part of an effort to send inmates back into society with tools that will enable them to make a successful return to society. The orientation pod makes sure that new inmates learn the ropes rules from the staff rather than other inmates. Those with sentences of six months or less live separately to keep them from learning habits from more serious offenders.

Third is the staff. Every one of the dozen staff members had a clear sense of the mission to be accomplished. Many began their careers as correctional officers and had advanced through the ranks to more specialized positions. A young woman exercised full authority over a pod of difficult inmates, and several instructors spoke with pride of the progress being made by their charges.

Fourth is the structured schedule. Each inmate has 40 hours of work each week. Studying academics or learning to change their behavior are both important to their successful lives after incarceration. Inmates have earned more than 3,000 GEDs, and many take the first step to controlling their addictions in the behavioral classes at the jail. I observed the active print shop and sewing and upholstery operations, activities that market commercial products. Work in these facilities provides job training for the future.

Stonybrook is a correctional institution, and the well-kept physical plant cannot disguise the reality that it is a home for lawbreakers. As a visitor, however, I judge it to be a model for the correction it provides rather than the punishment it imposes. Sheriff Ashe, Keep up the good work.