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L.A. County Jail Launches Program to Keep Inmates from Coming Back

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James Williams has been in and out of jail since he was 17.

Now, at 27, he is hoping this stint behind bars will be his last. He is enrolled in a pilot program at Pitchess Detention Center that aims to educate inmates in trades such as welding and dog grooming, as well as life skills such as how to deal with a supervisor at work.

The 90 men in the “Back on Track” program, which began on Feb. 17, also will receive help finding housing, jobs and schools after they are released.

If inmates become productive members of society instead of committing more crimes, the public will be safer and save money on incarceration costs, said California Attorney General Kamala Harris, who held a press conference Wednesday with Los Angeles County Sheriff Jim McDonnell to launch the program.

“For too long, when we’ve talked about criminal justice policy, we’ve been offered a false choice, to either be tough on crime or soft on crime without being smart on crime,” said Harris, who is running for the U.S. Senate seat being vacated by Barbara Boxer.

Pitchess, which houses some of L.A. County’s nearly 18,000 jail inmates, already offers vocational and educational programs at its sprawling facilities in Castaic. Back on Track combines existing offerings with some new ones into a comprehensive curriculum where each inmate takes a different set of classes based on his needs.

The program includes a cognitive behavior component where inmates practice making better decisions, acting out scenarios, such as what it’s like to be on the streets and sober, and what to do if friends want to throw a “welcome home” party that includes alcohol and drugs, Harris said.

Most of the participants are non-violent drug offenders. Half grew up with parents who were incarcerated at some point, and half have not completed high school.

They will be tracked in the years ahead to see if they re-offend and if they find work, housing and stable relationships. Their performance will be measured against control groups who either took traditional classes in jail or no classes at all.

“This program offers hope to those who cycle in and out of our jails and need a life raft to set them on a new course,” McDonnell said.

continued on next page

The pilot program, which officials hope to eventually expand into other jails and to include female inmates, is funded with a \$750,000 federal grant and private money from the Ford Foundation, California Wellness Foundation and Rosenberg Foundation.

The office of the attorney general, the L.A. County Sheriff's Department, the L.A. County Probation Office, local community colleges and Five Keys Charter School all will be involved in the program.

Williams, who is scheduled to be released in December after serving his time on a burglary charge, said he kept committing crimes because he didn't have a job and "developed a mentality of wrongdoing."

He is good with his hands, he said, and is hoping that his welding class and the other skills he learns will lead to a different outcome.

"It's an opportunity to help me change my life," he said.