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August 05, 2015 4:03PM

Sex offender registration research panel begins work in Hartford

HARTFORD - A special committee impaneled by state lawmakers to research and recommend changes to Connecticut's sex offender registry and sentencing guidelines began its work Wednesday – with several Norwich officials paying attention.

“Stating the obvious, we all have a lot of difficult work ahead of us, but I think that’s the point – to grapple with some of the tension that comes with that dialogue,” said Stephen Grant, co-chairman of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission’s Special Committee on Sex Offenders. “The bottom line for us is to protect public safety while continuing to seek opportunities for system improvement.”

In May, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy signed a special act to create the committee, which is scheduled to deliver its final report and slate of recommendations to the General Assembly’s judiciary committee by Dec. 15, 2017. The committee met for the first time Wednesday at the Capitol complex in Hartford.

One major area of study will be the role transitional housing plays in bridging the gap for offenders released from prison but under state supervision.

Ed Palmieri, deputy director of the Court Support Services Division’s adult services, said there are 2,292 offenders under supervision, with 633 considered “high level” requiring four meetings a month with probation officers.

He also said state contracted housing and The January Center on the grounds of the Corrigan-Radgowski Correctional Center in Montville are frequently used to ensure sex offenders living in the community are being safety monitored.

“There are a number of offenders that do come out with a housing proposal available to them, which creates some other challenges for us. The best place for us to put an offender is a supportive living environment,” Palmieri said.

Palmieri said the recidivism rate for sex offenses in Connecticut has dropped from 36 percent in 2011 to 26 percent through the first half of this year, mainly because of the network of agencies working together.

But the practice of contracting with private companies to place sex offenders in communities has been assailed by Eastern Connecticut officials, who say this part of the state has been unfairly burdened.

Homeless shelters also receive sex offenders – which puts them in a difficult position, because many registered offenders find it hard to secure long-term living quarters for themselves.

That’s one reason Lisa Tepper Bates, executive director of the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, was asked to join the committee.

“Transitional housing as a way to resolve homelessness is less and less favorably regarded as a way to secure permanent housing, and I think this has particular relevance in this discussion,” she said. “It’s very difficult to secure permanent housing for individuals on the sex offender registry.”

The Connection Inc., Connecticut’s preferred contractor for placement of those on probation or parole, operates a supportive housing program known as REACH, or Re-Entry Assisted Community Housing, in eight locations across the state, including Norwich.

The Broad Street facility operated by The Connection is located across from a bus stop and in the heart of a residential area.

Norwich’s City Treasurer Brian Curtin, whose home abuts the REACH site, was in Hartford Wednesday to learn more about the committee’s task.

“It’s a very complex issue, and when the result of this kind of housing is that people are afraid of using their backyard, that’s a problem,” he said.

Others, including state Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, and Norwich Human Services Director Lee-Ann Gomes, hope to see the adoption of a tiered sex offender registry that provides the public with more information about the nature of a person’s conviction.

Both were in attendance Wednesday.

“I think we need better housing options, but we also really need that tiered system,” Gomes said.

State Rep. Emmett Riley, D-Norwich, also attended Wednesday’s meeting. He praised officials for taking an in-depth look at the controversial issue.

“It’s a starting point. But what is happening in Norwich shouldn’t happen in other towns,” he said.



A home at 152 Broad Street in Norwich is occupied by sex offenders enrolled in Re-Entry Assisted Community Housing. File/ NorwichBulletin.com

