

Re-entry program seeks to prevent habitual offenders

Judge Scott Crichton and Caddo Parish Sheriff Steve Prator are among many public officials, corrections workers and private residents seeking to prevent habitual offenders in Louisiana's judicial system.

Crichton has created several programs with the cooperation of the sheriff's office and Caddo Correction Center, with the express intention of educating people and preventing crime.

One of the programs called No More Strikes targets felony inmates being held at the CCC. The program is a part of the re-entry program Caddo Parish operates that is geared toward getting parolees and released prisoners to assimilate back into society and stay out of jail.

"They don't have the tools," Crichton said. "But they want to do good. This program is designed to give them the resources they need to be a part of society."

"I really want these guys to get out and not come back," said Sandra Darby, the re-entry program manager. "This program offers them great opportunities."

Crichton began the program by telling the inmates about the process of making a law, and then explained what they had to do to

stay out of jail.

The focus of the lecture was to educate the offenders on their rights and options once they get out. It was about changing their attitude and accepting responsibility.

"The first thing you have to understand is you are who you are, a convicted felon," Crichton told the inmates. "I wish it wasn't true, you wish it wasn't true, but it is."

Crichton told the inmates about past cases, even cases he had ruled on and the sentences he issued. Some of the inmates would grumble at some of the heavier sentences Crichton had imposed. He maintains it was not his choice that these men and women commit the crimes; they made the choices themselves.

"I didn't do this to them, they did this to themselves," Crichton said. "It's time to take responsibility for those actions."

He told the men the letter of the law concerning their parole. He stressed

resisting the urge to do drugs or hang out with an unsavory crowd. He told them the parole office will be understanding if they can't immediately find a job as long as they can prove they've tried.

"I want you to get jobs. I want you guys to pay taxes," Crichton said, drawing a laugh from the inmates.

Crichton answered questions from inmates, which covered a range of subjects. One inmate asked the judge if he believed 99 percent of the people he had put away were guilty. He answered yes without hesitation.

"Every case I've prosecuted as a DA, every case I've ruled on as a judge, I believe they were all guilty," Crichton said. "If I didn't, I'd do something about it."

He said he cared about the inmates; he wants to help keep people out of jail and aid them in becoming productive members of society, not just for their own sake, but to help save taxpayer dollars.

"Incarceration cost the taxpayer a fortune," Crichton said.

Darby said she believed the program has had significant success. She said about 100 inmates were participating in the program, and she hopes she never sees them in the CCC again once they get out.

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The CCC staff is supportive of the programs Crichton has developed and said they believed the majority of the inmates participating were committed.

"I think they reacted well," Sgt. Anthony Gaines said. "You can see that some of the younger ones, it went in one ear and out the other; they just wanted out of their cells, but I think most of them weren't there to exploit the system."

Gaines said he believed the program was a move in the right direction and stressed being accountable for the actions the inmates take.

"I think the benefit is responsibility," Gaines said. "Once they realize they did something wrong to end up here, it's easier on them."