

Escaped or absconded?

Lake Region Law Enforcement Center admin works to educate public about the purpose of its Reentry Center after recent reports result in negative publicity

by Allison Lindgren

Recent reports about “escapes” at the Lake Region Law Enforcement Center (LEC) have generated much coffee talk and comment at local cafes and on social media. In an effort to better understand the situation, I placed a call to LEC administrator Rob Johnson.

It quickly became apparent that it is important to differentiate between breaking news of an escape from jail and a report of someone absconding from the Lake Region Residential Reentry Center (RRC). This week’s focus is on the Reentry Center at the LEC, which is the place where two of the recently reported “escapes” (which are actually absconctions) have happened, to gain a little insight into its purpose.

According to Johnson, the RRC was established in March 2010 and is part of the Lake Region Law Enforcement Center. The center houses citizens who have been incarcerated and are now getting ready to return to their home communities. The Department of Corrections refers to it as a Reentry Center, but Johnson says most people better understand it as a halfway house.

The Reentry Center at the LEC is one of five in the state; however, it is the only publicly-run reentry center; the others are all privately operated. Johnson said reentry facilities are not required to report a walk-away from their facility to the media, and most don’t. LEC officials do because they have made the decision to be transparent, which also increases their chances of apprehend-

ing the individual, even though it brings negative attention to the LEC.

The Lake Region Residential Reentry Center’s mission is to provide a safe, structured environment for returning citizens to develop the skills necessary to become responsible and productive members of society. The Lake Region RRC serves as a transitional step for those citizens returning to their communities from various penitentiaries, and as an alternative to jail for local judicial jurisdictions.

The facility in Devils Lake can house up to 28 total returning citizens, 20 male and 8 female, with an average daily population of approximately 23. They stay in rooms that are similar to a college dorm room, with bunk beds and a desk area. While in the RRC, these returning citizens are expected to be productive.

A Facebook post by Johnson explains what life is like for a returning citizen. He wrote, “Most will have addiction and/or behavioral health treatment services that they will be required to participate in. They will be expected to seek, find, and maintain employment. The resident is also required to be financially responsible by adhering to a budget process where they budget their money to buy their own personal necessities such as hygiene, clothing, and other authorized property. They are also required to pay toward fines and fees and having to pay a portion of their room and board while residing in the facility. These expectations relieve some of the burden from the tax

payers while also giving the residents the experience and tools they may lack in managing their own finances. We also assist residents, who do not have supportive friends or family to move in with, in finding housing. This is easily one of the biggest obstacles for our resident population as their housing options are extremely limited when they have a felony conviction on their record.”

Though the returning citizens are monitored closely, there are no locks on the doors, as they gain privileges and responsibilities aimed at making their reentry to their communities more successful. They are subject to random drug and alcohol testing but can go to work, shop, go for pre-approved walks, visit the library and attend counseling and support group meeting like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous.

Therefore, when a returning citizen who resides at the reentry center fails to report back or is unaccounted for, it is reported to the Department of Corrections as an absconcion, not an escape. An absconcion is similar to a failure to report to work incident, as often employers (and, in this case, the LEC) notes the infraction on the citizen’s permanent record. However, in many cases the absconcion results in additional time served in jail.

From August 2013 through February 2017, the average stay was about two months for the 452 citizens who have returned to society through the RRC. Johnson reported that only 61 percent of those 452 returning citizens were successful in transitioning

back into the community, a number with which Johnson is not satisfied. He has set a goal to have an 80 percent successful transition rate for 2018.

“As I indicated in my “Importance of Work Release” piece posted to our Facebook page on November 4, 2016, more than 99 percent of offenders incarcerated in our jail will be released back into society at some point in time,” Johnson said. “We, as a community, need to ensure that the resources are available for these returning citizens that give them the highest probability of being successful. When a convicted offender cannot find employment, cannot find suitable housing for themselves and oftentimes for their family, or when the addiction or mental health services are not readily available the odds of re-offending are significantly increased.

The RRC houses offenders from multiple agencies; the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), The United States Probation Office (USPO), the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (DOCR), as well as for the five member counties the LEC serves and the City of Devils Lake.

The DOCR houses the most returning citizens at the RRC and primarily uses the RRC as a transition point for those who have qualified for and been granted parole. These residents will come to the RRC from a state facility and spend an average of 90 days in the facility before transitioning fully into the community.

“Most importantly is that our residents should not

be feared or scorned. They are making an effort to try and better themselves and to establish a law-abiding lifestyle they can maintain,” Johnson concluded. “We do hold them accountable for their actions, but we also work with the residents. If they are making poor decisions, we work with them to recognize the poor decision, why they made the decision they did and how they can change their thinking to ensure they are making good decisions.”

So, why should citizens care? First of all, we all have an obligation to care. Consider the financial costs alone. The North Dakota Department of Correction and Rehabilitation (DOCR) has a budget of more than \$215 million. They currently house about 1,700 inmates. Five years ago, the state inmate population was half of what we see now, and DOCR projects the inmate population to nearly double again in the next 10 years to around 3,000 inmate by 2025. It costs North Dakota taxpayers on average \$42,460 per inmate per year.

In a Bismarck Tribune article discussing the high toll that incarceration puts on the state, Leann Bertsch, DOCR director, said she believes the problem with North Dakota’s growing incarceration goes far beyond what her department can handle. “This isn’t a prison problem. It’s a system problem,” she said. “Nearly every inmate who walks into a North Dakota prison will one day walk out, and it is in all of our best interest that they don’t return.”