



SENATOR MATT BARTLE

District 8 – Capitol Building, Room 319 Jefferson City, MO 65101

**Column for Week of:
August 20, 2007**

**Contact: Todd Scott
(573) 751-1464 / (888) 711-9278**

The MO Dept. of Corrections: Administering Justice and Protecting Society

One of the most fundamental duties of government is to preserve order. In this week's column I'd like to feature the dedicated work of the 11,000 men and women who work for the Missouri Department of Corrections. It is not hyperbole to suggest that without the dedicated service of law enforcement and these correctional officers, society would soon dissolve into anarchy.

Some people may be surprised to know that the responsibility to pass and enforce criminal laws is primarily in the hands of 50 states, not the federal government. Currently there are about 30,000 inmates serving time in our state. There are another 51,900 former inmates on probation, and 18,000 on parole.

For violent offenders who are a danger to society, our laws must impose strict penalties in keeping with the severity of their crimes. Among the worst offenders are those who prey on innocent children. Probation and parole officers work very hard to ensure sex offenders register with local law enforcement so the community can research the identities and crimes of convicted sex offenders. These officers also work diligently to enforce the laws prohibiting sex offenders from residing near a school or day care center. Under legislation I authored, the Division of Probation and Parole can track sex offenders in the community by using GPS satellite technology. Also, last session the legislature passed "Jessica's Law" that imposes mandatory 30 year sentences on child molesters and life sentences for repeat offenders.

Eventually, up to 97 percent of offenders incarcerated will return to our communities. Fortunately, the majority of these were not serving time for violent offenses but reintegrating these individuals back into society is still challenging. These offenders are, in some cases, the spouses, children and grandchildren of our friends, neighbors or even ourselves.

Unfortunately, 34 percent of offenders will return back to the correctional system after being released from prison. To address this problem, Department of Corrections works with other state agencies and representatives from the community who have partnered together to strengthen offender reentry practices. Under the program, prior to leaving prison offenders can take parenting classes, get a GED or get substance abuse treatment. Offenders can also search for and apply for jobs prior to being released. In addition to the work of the state, dozens of faith-based organizations help the offenders succeed when returning to the community.

One exciting faith-based voluntary program the department has brought to Missouri to combat recidivism rates is called the InterChange Freedom Initiative (IFI). This program is in use in other states and has shown great promise. IFI is based on a program widely used in Brazil where recidivism rates are said to be less than 5%.

Keeping dangerous offenders of our streets and preparing those who have paid their debt to society for re-entry is a job of great importance. We all owe a debt of gratitude to all the hard-working folks at the Department of Corrections for their service.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov or by phone at (888) 711-9278. My web address is <http://www.senate.mo.gov/bartle>.