

NEWS

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Public Health and Criminal Justice Issues Often Intersect

Mental illness, homelessness, PTSD and other traumas affect prisoners and former offenders

PHILADELPHIA — “If we don’t provide ex-offenders with the opportunity to have housing, how can we expect them to succeed?” asked John Wetzel, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections at the recent public health panel: **The Nexus of Between Public Health and Criminal Justice**. Along with Secretary Wetzel, the 200 attendees also heard from Estelle Richman, Acting Deputy Director for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. A panel of five specialists on the subject of public health also made remarks based on the keynote speakers speeches and answered questions from the audience. The event was presented by the Public Health Initiative of the Pennsylvania Prison Society.

Public health and criminal justice are rarely mentioned in the same sentence. However, Amalia Isaa, Ph D, of the University of Sciences stated, “Criminal justice in the manner it is currently carried out *is* a health issue in its own right.”

Facts that came out of the session include:

- 25 percent of former offenders are homeless upon their release Their death rate is highest in the first two weeks after their release, often due to having no home and no access to health care.
- A large percentage of Pennsylvania’s current prison population is nonviolent, behind bars for misdemeanors.
- In Pennsylvania’s prisons, 17 percent of men and 48 percent of women have mental health issues.
- A specialty court helps determine VA benefits available for veterans so that they may better cope with PTSD and other traumas suffered due to battle conditions
- Five years ago 60 percent of the prisoners in the Philadelphia Prison System were tested for HIV; today 80 percent are tested. Twice as many cases of HIV are now being identified and treated in jail.
- Prisoners leave the Philadelphia Prison System with at least five days of medication, plus a 15 day prescription – if they can pay for it. Out of 5200 prescriptions last year, only 37 were filled.
- The incarceration rate for women has grown by 800% over the past twenty years. Most of these women are in their 30s and 40s and in prison for drug infractions and other nonviolent crimes.
- Nearly 80 percent of the women entering SCI Muncy have suffered various forms of abuse. A high proportion of women enter prison suffering from PTSD and various addictions.

Ms. Richman, focusing on public housing, says, “If we’re going to make an impact on those coming out of prison, we have to offer safe and affordable housing...If we don’t spend now but spend three times as much in the future, are we really saving taxpayers’ money?”

It was concluded that we public health and criminal justice professionals must use science – empirical data and theory – to determine who goes to prison and who may qualify for alternatives to prison; the issue must be looked at in a holistic manner.

The Pennsylvania Prison Society, originally known as the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, was founded in 1787 by well-respected Philadelphians such as Benjamin Franklin and Dr. Benjamin Rush. The mission of the Prison Society is to promote a humane, just, and constructive correctional system and a rational approach to criminal justice.

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