

# The Star-Ledger

## **How convicts, law enforcement and actor from 'The Wire' would end cycle of crime**

By Blake Nelson

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On Valentine's Day in Newark, the state attorney general sat next to a man who served 30 years in prison for murder.

A few feet away, a 23-year-old who spent time in county jail sat across from the head of the parole board.

In all directions, top law enforcement officials and lawmakers sat should to shoulder with men who collectively said they'd served more than 170 years in prison. It was the first in a series of listening sessions planned by the nonprofit New Jersey Reentry Corporation, all designed to improve the criminal justice system.

"It's about healing communities," former Gov. Jim McGreevey, who chairs the reentry corporation's board, said to the approximately 100 people crammed into a conference room.

The event partly served as a way for the group to recruit officers, former prisoners and clergy to volunteer as "ambassadors" who can help ease the transition out of prison, modeled after a Columbia University program. More than 230 have already signed up, McGreevey said.

One ambassador is the actor Michael K. Williams, best known for his work on the TV show "The Wire."

"We spoke about some people getting a second chance," Williams told the room. "There's a lot of people out there, a lot of our youth that never got a first chance."

Officials hope these conversations will eventually help reduce the number of times people are sent back to prison.

A little less than a third of people released end up back behind bars, according to a recent state report. For those on parole specifically, about 1,600 people out of 15,500 returned to prison last year, according to parole board data.

On Friday, men who had been convicted of crimes went around the table to say what they wanted from officials, and what they saw as their responsibility now that they're free.

Lance Bennette, 23, said mental health treatment was crucial, especially for veterans.

Edwin Ortiz, a 52-year-old who spent decades in prison for murder, spoke about the obligation he feels to discuss his past with kids.

U.S. Attorney Craig Carpenito encouraged him and others to continue their outreach.

"Your voice comes with credibility Gurbir and I will never have," Carpenito said, referring to the state attorney general.

There was immediate applause when one man asked for more services inside prisons to help prepare for reentry. Some spoke about how addiction, trauma and a lack of job training can cripple success.

Others said improving relationships between cops and the communities they cover could head off problems early on.

Madeline Cox Arleo, a federal judge in New Jersey, emphasized the need for more community policing. Gurbir Grewal, the state attorney general, agreed. Resources were tight for departments, he said, but having enough cops in the street to build relationships was a proven strategy.

"We need to continue to do more," he said.

Samuel Plumeri Jr., chair of the parole board, praised the gathering shortly after it ended.

"It helps us do a better job," he said.