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Chief Justice reviews new probation effort

By George Lauby
 The North Platte Bulletin

Nebraska Supreme Court Chief Justice Mike Heavican toured a new “reporting center” Monday, July 18 at the Dist. 11 probation office in North Platte.

Under state prison and sentencing reforms that were rolled out a year ago, convicts will go to reporting centers for a variety of services geared to help them succeed in reentering society.

Most criminals who are convicted of Class 4 felonies are now placed on probation, with only a few going to jail. And, those who are sentenced to jail typically serve a probation term too, when they get out.

It’s all part of a program approved by the Legislature in 2015 to focus on community corrections and rehabilitation rather than building more prisons, Heavican said.

The reporting center will coordinate, organize and track the success of such programs as drug treatment, rehabilitation, mental health care, job training and help with housing.

The aim is to reduce the number of inmates in state prisons. State prisons are about 60 percent over the capacity for which they were designed.

“We want everyone who comes in here to be a success,” Heavican told the employees of the reporting center. “I know that is a high goal, but that must be the goal of all of us who work in the courts and probation.”

So far, about 110 people on probation and 50 or so Drug Court participants use the North Platte reporting center. The reporting center consists of a half-dozen offices and conference rooms on the second



Sen. Mike Groene, from left, Lincoln County Judge Kent Turnbull and Chief Justice Heavican.

floor of the building across the street south of the Lincoln County Courthouse at 103 East Third. Lesser offenders get similar services at a separate Probation Office east across the parking lot.

The reform was expected to add another 200 or so probationers each year across the 17 counties that comprise District 11, based on 2014-15 felony filings, Dist. 11 Probation Director Lonnie Folchert has said.

Folchert is ill and could not attend the tour, but Heavican’s remarks were recorded and sent to him by smart phone.

Heavican thanked all the probation officers who attended for their work in support of the community. “This is what probation should be all about,” he said.

He said it’s a little early to measure success, but he was happy to have the opportunity to talk to probation officers as he toured the building.

“Now we have a lot of anecdotal evidence that it’s making a huge difference,” he said.

Heavican thanked Sen. Mike Groene for his work in the Legislature.

“He values your input and we value his support for probation and re-entry

(rehabilitation,)” Heavican said.

Heavican said Groene is a force in the Legislature.

Fiscally, he said it is not inexpensive to build and staff reporting centers. The North Platte office has added about seven more employees.

“But it costs a lot more to incarcerate someone,” he said.

“And if we’re successful, people will be contributing, working jobs, paying taxes, not committing crimes. If they are contributing to society, we are obviously making better progress than if they get out of the penitentiary with little or no rehabilitation.”

“But it will only work with good, dedicated people behind it,” he said.

“Congratulations on your successes, and we anticipate a lot more success,” he said.

A year ago, Folchert told the county commissioners



Chief Justice Mike Heavican

that the state reform would mean more work for his employees. class 4 felons are automatically sentenced to a term of probation, and many convicts with Class 2 or 3 felonies will be more likely to be sentenced to jail as well as probation, he said.

And, if a probationer violates probation, he or she can be sanctioned by a jail term of three days or longer. up to 30 days, then return to probation, he said.

Currently, people who violate probation can be sentenced to long jail terms. Folchert told the commissioners that he has ample office space in North Platte to handle

the increased workload. The District 11 office was expanded first in 2014 after probation became the more prevalent sentence for juveniles, under separate state legislation.

Folchert also said in all, the new round of changes will take place over five years – so the changes will be less abrupt than the changes in juvenile sentencing, which took place during two years.

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