

FROM THE SHERIFF'S DESK

Getting education behind bars

By Sheriff **Peter J. Koutoujian**

With the holidays upon us, students and teachers across the Commonwealth are taking a much-needed break after this academic semester's final push.

At a different kind of institution, students of a different kind are also wrapping up their studies.

The Middlesex House of Correction in Billerica, sitting atop a hill with its worn brick facade and soaring steeple, could be mistaken for an institute of higher learning – if you ignore the razor-wired double fence. Walking through the halls, inmates play the role of student, many eager to reach the academic goals those of us on the outside sometimes take for granted. What they may not realize is that their education is increasing public safety.

Houses of correction, such as the one in Billerica, have long been utilized to incarcerate convicted criminals facing sentences of two and a half years or less. These men have earned the punishment imparted upon them by the court system and face the consequences of their negative actions every day.

But punishment alone is a waste of time and money. We have an opportunity behind the walls to change an inmate's thought process, break their cycle of bad decisions and prevent recidivism. We provide rehabilitation programs, such as substance abuse classes and anger management, which address the

underlying risk factors that lead to criminal behavior.

Our facility also gives us the opportunity to teach.

The goal is slightly different from a school – we don't want our students coming back for another semester. We want them graduated for good. But basic principles of education exist: engage, enlighten and examine.

When an inmate enters our custody he undergoes a rigorous evaluation period in which numerous criminological factors are determined, including education level. Based on this evaluation, the individual is put on a track that best addresses his particular needs. The reason for such in-depth, up-front analysis is to utilize the time behind bars to prepare for eventual release back to society, which 100 percent of our inmates will do. By attacking the root causes of criminal behavior through targeted programming, the inmates increase their chances of becoming more productive members of society. Education is a key piece.

Studies show that people with a high school diploma or equivalent earn 15 percent more than those without. Research also reveals that inmates who earned their GED incarcerated in a facility like a house of correction, are 23 percent less likely to re-offend than those who did not. Upon release, former inmates have a difficult enough time finding gainful employment. Pile on the added disadvantage of no high school diplo-

ma and you've got yourself a recipe for recidivism.

Education matters.

Inmates in our custody can participate in numerous educational opportunities. Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes and General Educational Development (GED) classes are the foundation. Since the start of 2011, 38 inmates have received their GED certificate while incarcerated in Billerica, with an additional 25 earning the distinction in early December.

Almost all universities, colleges and employers accept the GED as equivalent to a high school diploma, which levels the playing field. Upon receiving a GED, an inmate earns the right to continue into one of our vocational programs, such as Culinary Arts, which offer an opportunity to earn community college credits.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education annually rates institutions of learning based on a point system called SMART. In this system, institutions are rated in five categories, such as attendance and achieving the goals set by the teachers. This year the Middlesex House of Correction scored the highest it ever has in total score, with maximum points awarded in three of the five categories.

Providing education to these men is not simple altruism. It is simply a matter of public safety. We motivate the desire for personal success and supplement it with



the basic tools to achieve. Criminal behavior, which was once used as a means, is replaced with an educational foundation. From there, these men build confidence and legitimate job skills.

Like most schools, we are using education as a spark for igniting growth, seeking to better prepare students for the future. But unlike most schools, we do so behind razor-wired double fence.