



## Justice For All Part 6: Town hall meeting explores community questions about justice system

ANNE JUNGEN | [ajungen@lacrossetribune.com](mailto:ajungen@lacrossetribune.com) | Posted: Friday, March 4, 2011 12:05 am

Courtney Houser wanted to face the sheriff and ask what life is like for her fiancé in the La Crosse County Jail. Thomas Harris wanted to know whether younger members of the community could tour the facility to see where they'll land if they break the law.

On Thursday, they got their answers.

About 125 community leaders and members of the public filled the new jail expansion for a "Justice for All" town hall meeting to tackle complex issues affecting the jail and county's criminal justice system.

A panel of Sheriff Steve Helgeson and Circuit Judge Dale Pasell could offer only limited explanations as questions from the audience spanned the operations of the jail and justice system and alternative programming.

But the meeting started a community discussion, "and that's what this was all about," said Keith Belzer, event organizer and member of the La Crosse County Criminal Justice Management Council, a town hall co-sponsor. Questions included:

### **How are mentally ill inmates handled in jail?**

About 40 percent of inmates suffer from mental illnesses, and most take medications, Helgeson said. Inmates undergo an extensive survey during booking to identify the condition and are supplied medications and counseling services, said Steve Josephson, the jail's mental health clinician. "My philosophy is to give the inmates what is needed," he said.

### **Why are there a lot of sex offenders released on probation?**

That's a misconception, Pasell said. Judges treat sex offender cases "very seriously" and typically impose lengthy prison sentences, he said. Sex offenders also can be recommitted under the state's sexual predator law.

### **Who is in jail, how long do they typically stay and why are they here?**

Inmates stay for an average of 11 days, Helgeson said. They are in custody on bond or a probation hold or serving a sentence. Circuit Judge Ramona Gonzalez encouraged community members to attend the county's daily 1:30 p.m. criminal intake court to view a portion of the jail population. "Many times it's your neighbors," she said. "And many times it's your neighbors who had an argument with their significant other."

### **What percentage of inmates are battling substance abuse, and how is it dealt with in the jail?**

A "very high" number of inmates are addicted to alcohol and drugs, Helgeson said. "Most of the persons coming into the jail, especially if they are arrested later in the day, are under the influence of alcohol or drugs," he said. Alcohol and narcotics anonymous classes are available to all inmates.

### **Is the drug treatment court successful?**

Pasell called his role in drug court "once of the most satisfying things I've had an opportunity to do as judge." The court allows those struggling with drug addictions to get and follow through with treatment. Participants are held accountable for relapses and rewarded for successes in the heavily scrutinized treatment court. "All the evidence anyone has ever found ... is that we get better outcomes when we put people through something like this," Pasell said.

### **What happens if an offender violates a condition of Justice Sanctions, a jail-alternative program for low-risk offenders?**

Offenders can be prosecuted if they commit a new crime. If they are on bail, a judge can alter conditions depending on the violation, Pasell said. "It's an individualized decision," he said. "Again, we are looking at what we can do to change someone's behavior."