

November 2, 2017

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SHERIFF DART DECRIES CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM 'DESTINED TO FAIL'

Speaking at a benefit for formerly incarcerated women, Dart urged Illinoisans to be thoughtful, logical

CHICAGO—Illinois must rethink its approach to incarceration to focus more on delivering individualized medical help and other services to keep people out of prisons, Cook County Sheriff Thomas J. Dart said Thursday. Dart made the comments at a benefit for Grace House, a residential program for formerly incarcerated women that is a program of St. Leonard's Ministries on Chicago's Near West Side.

Dart noted that, in the majority of states, a prison, jail or hospital is the leading provider of mental health care. "Each era in history is judged by how people were treated," he said. "A hundred years from now, is that how we want to be remembered as a society?"

Dart's office runs the Sheriff's Justice Institute that advocates on behalf of poor and mentally ill people incarcerated at Cook County Jail. Thursday, he said that the majority of people in Illinois'—and the nation's—prisons and jails are primarily guilty of bad choices, such as addiction, and not of violence. Yet the criminal justice system addresses only the acts, not the underlying causes, such as mental illness, homelessness or addiction.

His message resonated with the residents of Grace House, many of whom shared personal stories of repeated addiction and incarceration. They all said the key to breaking that chain was having a stable place to live, coupled with support services that deliver hope. St. Leonard's Ministries offers a broad range of residential re-entry services to formerly incarcerated people. Services include housing, health care, addiction treatment, job and skills training, high school completion, and counseling.

State Rep. Camille Y. Lilly (D-78th) also spoke, noting how the "sisters" of Grace House were part of her inspiration to seek changes in Illinois laws concerning delivery of health care to prisoners and expunging criminal records after prison terms are completed.

Several Grace House women performed parts of "The Power of Grace," a theater piece featuring memoirs and poems they authored in conjunction with the Still Point Theatre Collective.

About St. Leonard's Ministries

St. Leonard's Ministries, founded in 1954, provides a setting in which men and women recently released from prison can rebuild their lives. Residents are provided with an array of program services designed to assist them as they make the transition to successful, independent living. During their stay at St. Leonard's interim and long-term housing programs, residents are helped to reassess value systems, reorder priorities, and develop socially and legally responsible patterns of behavior. In addition to housing programs, St. Leonard's also offers life skills, job training, high school completion classes, and job placement services at its Barlow Center for Education and Employment. The recidivism rate for people who go through St. Leonard's programs is about 20 percent, compared with a state average of more than 50 percent.