

Department of Correction defends parolee notification system

By Greg Stanley

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ROCKFORD — Blame spread quickly after police arrested two out-of-town parolees for a horrific [stabbing and string of armed robberies](#) on Broadway this spring.

Police Chief Chet Epperson criticized the state Department of Corrections for not notifying him that parolees were coming until well after they were living in the city. Mayor Larry Morrissey said the DOC was dumping too many parolees here who have no connection to Rockford, in essence targeting the city for hard-to-place offenders.

But DOC officials say they follow state law and notify city and county law enforcement agencies at least two weeks before a person is let out of prison. And a Register Star review of DOC records shows that Winnebago County receives roughly the same percentage of state parolees as it sends to state prisons.

After a bloody July that was among the most violent months in Rockford history, all eyes have turned to violent crime reduction. Rockford is in the midst of creating a violent crime task force with state and federal officers, and is still in the early stages of a new prisoner re-entry project to better support and monitor ex-cons.

Epperson asked the City Council to accept a \$400,000 grant to build a database to help keep tabs on the parolees. The database is necessary, Epperson told aldermen, in part because sometimes the city is not notified about a new parolee moving to town until 30 to 40 days after he or she is already living here.

That is “categorically untrue,” said Tom Shaer, spokesman for the Illinois DOC. “We have high regard for Chief Epperson, but he is 100 percent wrong about this.”

The DOC sends email and letter notifications to the sheriff’s department, police department and state’s attorney office before the parolee is released from prison, without exception, Shaer said.

“We must give advance notice before the inmate walks out the front gate,” he said.

In the vast majority of cases that notification comes at least two weeks ahead of time, he said.

Sheriff Dick Meyers confirmed that his department is notified in advance about parolees. On Tuesday, for example, he received an email notification informing him, as well as three Rockford police officers and several state's attorney officials, that Lashun L. King will be released from [Sheridan Correctional Center](#) on Sept. 21 and will come to Rockford to stay with his fiance. They were given a color photo of King, notified of the address where he plans to live and the background that he served time for a narcotics violation.

Epperson said this week that the timing of notification depends on the case and softened his stance on the lag time his department experiences.

"It might get delayed in the mail," he said. "I get notified sometimes 10 days before a release and sometimes a day or two before."

He pointed to the highly publicized case of Jerome Pruitt and Victor Petty, two parolees from Cook and Peoria counties who were released to Rockford. They were arrested for a string of armed robberies on Broadway and charged with attempted murder for stabbing two people in March.

Pruitt had been paroled in January to the Rockford Rescue Mission on State Street. But he was actually living in a place on Broadway during the time of the robberies, Epperson said.

The new system will help bridge that information gap, he said.

Morrissey has pointed to the Pruitt and Petty case as evidence that Rockford receives parolees with no previous connections to the city.

"They never lived in Rockford, they never committed a crime in Rockford," he said. "As far as the city being the target for dropping off hard-to-place parolees — that happened a long time ago."

But, on the whole, Rockford isn't receiving more than its share of parolees.

In 2011, the latest year for which records are available, 1,573 of the state's prisoners were convicted in Winnebago County, or 3.2 percent of the prison population. That year, 826 of the state's parolees were living in Rockford, or 3.3 percent.

That figure has been consistent since 2005, with Winnebago County hosting between 3.2 and 3.4 percent of Illinois parolees while convicting between 3.2 and 3.5 percent of the state's prisoners, a Register Star examination of the data found.

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