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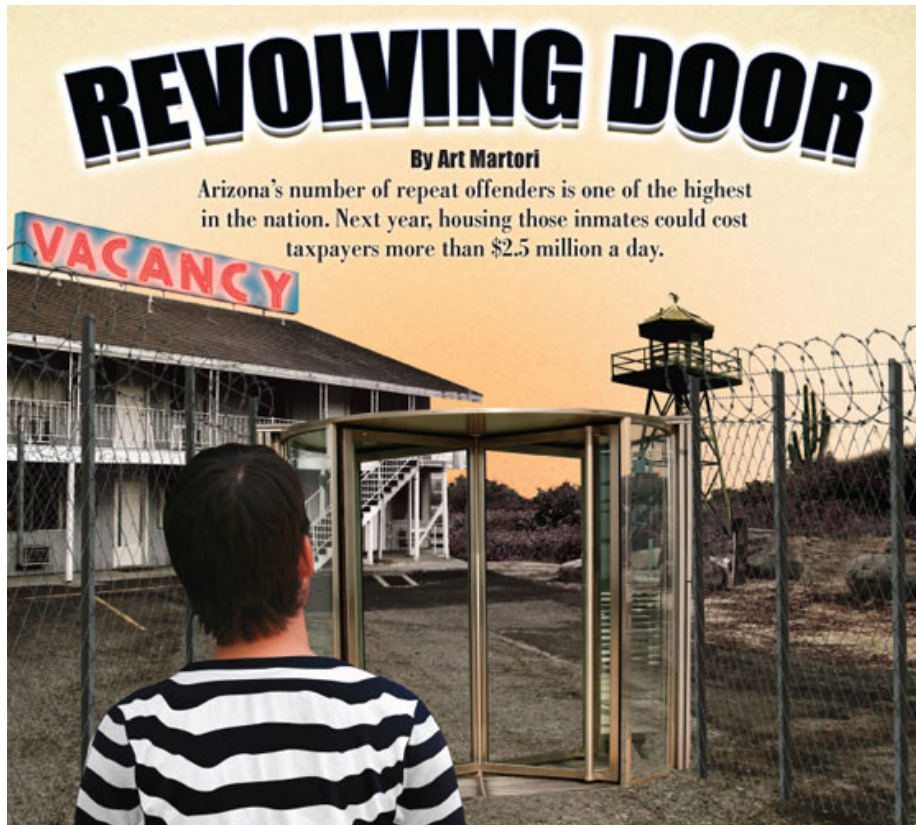
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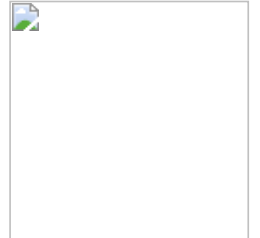


REVOLVING DOOR

By Art Martori

Arizona's number of repeat offenders is one of the highest in the nation. Next year, housing those inmates could cost taxpayers more than \$2.5 million a day.

A closer look into the private workspaces of some of the Valley's high-profile personalities. **OPEN DOOR POLICY**



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Award-Winning Feature Writing

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In a few months Diana Yeghoian expects to be a free woman. Incarcerated at the Arizona State Prison Complex at Perryville since Nov. 2004, Yeghoian, 35, says getting out is when the real challenge will begin – staying clear of the lifestyle that led her here.

"I could very well be dead right now," she says, reflecting on a series of drug felonies that earned her a five-year sentence in July 2004.

With large brown eyes and a warm smile, Yeghoian looks nothing like a drug felon, but an orange prison uniform offers testimony to a dangerous life as a drug dealer, a life she now believes made landing in prison inevitable.

"For the majority of my life, it's always been easy money," Yeghoian says. "Really, it (being incarcerated) was somewhat of a relief. You know it's coming."

Yeghoian says that before her incarceration, her life was steeped in a fast and dangerous world of drugs and crime. "The lifestyle was so chaotic, and the money was very attractive," she says.

Optimistic and looking forward to her new life, Yeghoian has some unfortunate odds staring back at her. The sobering fact is that her return to prison is nearly a statistical coin toss. According to its own study, the Arizona Department of Corrections reports that more than 42 percent of inmates will return to prison within three years of their release. Deemed recidivism, the problem is particularly vexing in Arizona, where the current budget crisis threatens to cut programs and funding.

The state's budget shortfall for fiscal 2009, estimated by the Arizona Joint Legislative Budget Committee to be around \$1.7 billion, could mean less funding for the state prison system. Meanwhile, Arizona faces a projected shortage of 2,000 prison beds during the coming year.

In the past decade, Arizona's inmate population has increased by 52 percent. Now, budget

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estimates put spending at more than \$2.5 million per day in the coming year.

The situation has left many lawmakers and law-enforcement agencies concerned, forced to consider drastic options to handle the bulging prison population. The Public Safety Performance Project, a nationwide survey launched in 2006 by the Pew Charitable Trusts, found that despite surging prison-population growth in Arizona, the state's per capita crime rate remains one of the highest in the nation.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the national rate of recidivism is 52 percent. For the first time in history, one in every 100 Americans is behind bars, according to Pew.

Over the past 20 years, Arizona's prisons and corrections spending have grown much faster than the national average, but its violent-crime rate has dropped more slowly," wrote Public Safety Performance Project Director Adam Gelb in a recent e-mail to *The Times*. Gelb added that over the past 20 years, state expenditures on corrections were less efficient than those in other states, with Arizona's prison population swelling by 40 percent over the national average.

The situation could eventually threaten some of the programs which, according to Department of Corrections officials, have been the most successful at reducing the number of repeat offenders.

Parallel Universe

When Diana Yeghoian first learned about the Parallel Universe program, she thought it might be just what she needed. She says that after being incarcerated for just a short time, she began to believe prison would be an opportunity for her to improve her life.

With Parallel Universe, so named for bringing real-world experience from the outside in to prisoners, inmates work in jobs and carry on vocational training designed to increase their chances of success upon re-entry into society. The program offers call-center positions, an opportunity to earn a high-school diploma or GED and vocational training in a variety of areas.

"I realized I'm going to do five years," Yeghoian says. "Being a dropout in high school my second semester of my sophomore year, (I had) no education. What am I gonna do with my prison time? Just sit around playing cards, smoking cigarettes?" Instead, Yeghoian began working on her high-school diploma, which she has now earned.

As Department of Corrections Director Dora Schriro walks through the halls of Perryville with an obvious pride, she occasionally bends over an inmate's shoulder to gauge their progress on a task, and then in a soft tone asks how their day is going.

Schriro, who was instrumental in getting Parallel Universe off the ground, credits the program with remarkable improvements throughout the state's 15 prisons. Most notable among the program's documented successes is a study of a sample group of 2,746 inmates, each of whom participated in the program. Though Schriro cautions that the standard three years has not yet passed for these inmates, the rate of recidivism among them stands at a mere 1.87 percent, a figure she says is "quite staggering and a marked improvement."

"We recognize they spent their entire lives acquiring attitudes and habits," Schriro says. "We press them every minute of every day to catch up... because we don't want to have to pay for them any more than we have to."

The Parallel Universe program was recognized in April by Harvard University's Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation, emerging from nearly 1,000 entries nationwide to place among 50 finalists.

Cheaper in the Long Run

Proponents contend that despite the cost of administering programs like Parallel Universe, teaching inmates self-discipline and providing them with self-esteem and a way to make a living upon their release may in fact cost taxpayers less in the long run. Repeat offenders frustrated with the system, who continue to place a financial burden on society for their repeated incarceration, are not difficult to find.

For much of his life, Eric Owen has been in and out of jail on mostly drug-related offenses. Like all convicted felons, Owen has been forced to forfeit a number of his civil rights. Unable to obtain college loans, Owen says that as a convicted felon it's even difficult to rent an apartment. "It's not gonna serve me to sit around here and get pissed off," Owen says. "However, I do feel limited."

In 2006, Owen, 36, was convicted of a felony parole violation while evading the law for felony possession of heroin. Although he faced a six-year prison term, he was able to convince the judge that he was sober and received probation rather than a prison term. Owen recently completed probation and now attends meetings to stay sober. He's even volunteered time answering phones at an anti-meth hotline. But still he faces "collateral sanctions" that come with a felony conviction.

"Those felonies still keep me down," he says. "I don't understand the logic."

Arizona spends an estimated \$100 million annually to send more than 4,000 offenders to prison

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for parole violations, according to the Justice Reinvestment Project. John Webster, managing director of the National Prison Sentencing Consultants (NPSC) says that in light of America's lost war on drugs, the amount of prison time handed down on drug and probation offenses seems ridiculous to him.

After thirty-something years, you would think they would realize incarcerating everyone just doesn't work," Webster says. "It's not only ineffective, it's exorbitantly expensive."

Nationally, 2.3 million Americans will do time in prison during 2008. Corrections spending in the U.S. over the past 20 years has jumped 315 percent, to \$49 billion annually, according to Pew. The Department of Justice estimates if the trend continues, one in every 15 Americans will do time at some point in their life.

Institutes of Crime

Webster points out that while in prison, first-time offenders are surrounded by hardened lawbreakers and as a result often become better criminals while behind bars, ironically causing prisons themselves to contribute to higher rates of recidivism. "We call it getting a Ph.D. in crime," Webster says. "Most guys who get out have a very difficult time getting a job and then resort to things they learned in prison."

Troy Evans would agree. In November 1992, Evans was sentenced to seven years in federal prison for armed bank robbery, after a six-month long crime spree that swept through five states and hit five banks. Today, Evans, 44, is standing onstage dressed in a classy suit in front of more than 300 people in a banquet room at the posh Scottsdale Plaza Resort. "This is the face of a kind man, an honest man, a man of his word," Evans tells the audience, pointing to himself. Then, an overhead projector flashes a 1992 mug shot taken just prior to his prison term.

Evans is giving a presentation to the non-profit group Arizona Correctional Educators Inc., whose members include teachers and staff from federal and state prisons, county probation departments and juvenile detention facilities.

It's how Evans now makes his living, as a motivational speaker, typically earning \$7,500 for a speaking engagement while relating his experiences in prison, where he beat the odds and changed his life. While serving time, Evans earned two college degrees, both with a 4.0 grade point average and honors designations.

Evans says several dangerous prison experiences triggered in him a newfound desire to change his life. From then on, he spent nearly all his time applying for various grants and scholarships. Finally, he received a check for a single class. "I started thinking I was doing something good," he tells the audience.

Even once outside prison, Evans says he found he was never far from returning for a probation violation. He recalls one of his first meetings with his parole officer, and says the high rates of recidivism are no surprise to him. "The system is set up for them to fail," Evans says. "My parole officer would tell me, 'I'm here to put you right back in there.'"

Like Evans, James Hamm, whose story set off a nationwide controversy ten years ago, believes rehabilitation should be more the focus for corrections officials.

In September 1974, Hamm, then a 26-year-old transient, shot and killed two people during a botched drug deal. He was sentenced to life in prison. During the next 15 years he began taking college courses, eventually graduating summa cum laude with a degree in sociology.

"I was rebuilding my personality," Hamm says.

In 1989, Hamm earned an early release and enrolled at Arizona State University College of Law, graduating in 1997. Two years after his parole had expired, Hamm passed the Arizona Bar exam, though his status as a convicted felon prevented him from practicing law in Arizona. After Hamm challenged the law, it was eventually decided by the Arizona Supreme Court, which denied Hamm the right to practice.

Sitting at his desk in the downtown Phoenix law office where the 59-year-old is now a paralegal, Hamm says he's not bitter.

"I'm very happy to be here," he says, admitting with a chuckle he's possibly a bit overqualified for the position. "Virtue is its own reward. This worked out fine."

Searching for Answers

In the past decade, Arizona's corrections spending has doubled, increasing from \$409 million in fiscal 1997 to \$817 million in fiscal 2007. The prison population, now around 35,000 inmates, is expected to grow to nearly 57,000 if current trends continue.

Arizona ranks in the top 10 nationally for murder, burglary and larceny-theft, according to a report by the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission.

While most states with laws requiring an offender to serve their entire sentence apply solely to violent offenders, Arizona requires that both violent and nonviolent offenders serve 85 percent of

their sentence before becoming eligible for release.

Lawmakers in other states have proposed early release options for non-violent offenders, but no similar measure is currently being considered in Arizona.

Earlier this year, Gov. Janet Napolitano proposed shifting non-violent offenders sentenced to a year or less into the county jails, a move which could potentially save the state an estimated \$60.8 million. However, many county law-enforcement officials counter, saying they too are experiencing issues related to overcrowding.

Getting Out

As for Yeghoian, she says prison might have been the only chance she had.

Sitting in the prison visiting area, as inmate #190579, Yeghoian says she remembers a routine with her father when she would head out for the streets. Although his fear for her life was unspoken, she could tell it was very real, Yeghoian says.

"It really broke my heart every time I would leave my dad's house and he would say, 'Be careful,'" she says. "It wasn't the type of be carefuls like, 'Don't get into a car accident.' It was one of those be carefuls like, 'I'm worried for your life.'"

At times when Yeghoian discusses her past and future, her voice breaks as she staves off a desire to cry. At others, she levels her gaze, revealing a quiet confidence in her speech.

"For most of my life I felt disappointed in myself because, even though I didn't have an education, I know I'm a smart girl," she says. "I know I can do better."

Yeghoian says due to programs like Parallel Universe, prison has been good for her. During her incarceration, she's reconnected with her two children and plans to move to Michigan to be with them and their father.

It's been a long time since Yeghoian has seen her daughter and knows it will take work to be a parent.

She plans to use her degree to start working as a paralegal and begin living a normal life, but she says the specter of her past is never far away.

"I know that lifestyle is always there," she says. "I know how easy it is to get there."

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