

Middlesex Sheriff joins forces with UTEC to assist young offenders

By Rick Sobey

BILLERICA — It's no secret that many young adult offenders find themselves in a vicious cycle.

After getting released from jail, there's a decent chance they'll re-offend within three years.

Middlesex Sheriff Peter Koutoujian admits jails must change how they serve this population. As a result, the Middlesex Jail & House of Correction plans to open a new unit that's specially designed for young adult offenders.

The sheriff's office will repurpose existing space at the jail and house of correction; it will be for individuals ages 18 to 24.

They're working on this with the Vera Institute of Justice and UTEC, a community-based program for young adults with histories of incarceration. The Middlesex Sheriff's Office is the first local jurisdiction in the nation to work with Vera to create such a specialized unit.

"The approach we've taken historically with this population is not working," Koutoujian said in a statement. "It's not in the best interest of our communities, these individuals or their families to continue down this path. New approaches — based on scientific research and proven practices — are required for us to break the cycle of incarceration these young adults find themselves trapped in."

As part of a review of the state's justice system last year, the Council of State Governments Justice Center (CSG) found 18- to 24-year-olds released from Massachusetts correctional facilities have

higher recidivism rates than older offenders. CSG reported 52 percent of those released from houses of correction and 56 percent of those released by the Department of Correction were reincarcerated within three years.

Nationwide, 18- to 24-year-olds comprise 10 percent of the population, but account for 21 percent of all individuals admitted to adult prisons each year. Recently, Vera worked with the Connecticut Department of Correction to create its 70-bed young adult unit at the Cheshire Correctional Institution.

"We're excited to be working with Sheriff Koutoujian, Special Sheriff (Shawn) Jenkins, and the team at the Middlesex Jail & House of Correction as they reimagine their approach to working with incarcerated young adults," Alexandra Frank, senior program associate at the Vera Institute of Justice, said in a statement.

"This project goes beyond simply improving living conditions for young people, and seeks to transform facility culture for everyone who lives and works in their facility," Frank added. "By providing meaningful opportunities for young adults to be successful and investing in their potential, supporting and reimagining the role of staff, Middlesex Jail & House of Correction is transforming the current correctional culture to promote equity, accountability, restoration, and healing — a goal we should all applaud."

The focus on young adults is not new at the Middlesex Jail & House of Correction. Since 2012, members of UTEC's Streetworker program have

been a constant presence at the facility, meeting with young adults preparing to return home to the Greater Lowell area.

"Thanks to the leadership of Sheriff Koutoujian, we are excited about the opportunity to bring more of UTEC's services behind the walls as part of the new young adult unit," Gregg Croteau, UTEC's executive director, said in a statement.

"Building upon our existing collaboration, this unit will enable UTEC to integrate more of our education, job training, and even counseling services.

"Connecting with young adults before release helps us all improve their opportunities for success, and ultimately reduce recidivism, when they return to the community," he added.

The sheriff's office, Vera and UTEC are working on data collection and collaborative onsite research. They have already visited the Cheshire Correctional Institution.

Over the coming months, staff members selected to work in the unit will undergo specialized training, a process will be established to identify and screen participants, and a finalized design for the unit will be completed.

"We believe this will be an innovative, cutting edge unit that will change lives for the better," Koutoujian said in a statement.

The unit will open in February, with an initial focus on young adult offenders from Merrimack Valley communities served by UTEC.