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Illinois starts giving prison inmates release credits

IDOC adopts reformed program to lower prison population

BY PATRICK YEAGLE



Certain Illinois inmates have started to receive early release credits under administrative rules adopted this month by the Illinois Department of Corrections. The move follows a state law passed last year in response to public outcry over a previous early release program.

Well-behaved inmates who show potential for rehabilitation can receive up to 180 days of "supplemental sentence credit" under the new IDOC rules, allowing eligible inmates to get out of prison up to six months early. The sentence credit system contains new safeguards to protect public safety, IDOC says.

"These rules and the law were very carefully crafted," said Stacey Solano, IDOC spokeswoman.

In late 2009, Gov. Pat Quinn suspended a long-standing program of awarding sentence credits to inmates after an Associated Press report revealed that IDOC had ended a tradition of requiring inmates to serve 60 days in prison before being awarded "Meritorious Good Time" credits. IDOC's change was meant to decrease the overall prison population, but it resulted in some inmates spending only a few months or days in prison before being released. That's because the state counts the months or even years that most inmates spend in county jails during a criminal trial toward their prison sentences.

In June 2012, Quinn signed a law that reinstated early release credits and addressed the problems that led to the program's suspension. The new system requires an inmate to spend 60 days in prison before receiving supplemental sentence credit, regardless of how much time the inmate spent in a county jail during trial. The credits are deemed a privilege rather than a right, and the director of IDOC, currently Sal Godinez, can revoke them at any time.

The credits authorized this month are "supplemental" and separate from two other existing types of sentence credits. Eligible inmates already had the ability to gain credits for completing an educational or rehabilitation program, and state law already contained a "statutory" credit which simply requires inmates to serve a certain percentage of their sentences.

Inmates cannot receive supplemental sentence credits if they face pending criminal charges, are deemed "sexually violent" or fit various other eliminating criteria. Before any inmate receives the credits, IDOC reviews the inmate's file and can withhold awards for negative or violent behavior.

"It's a very comprehensive review," said Solano, the IDOC spokeswoman. "This new process allows the department

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quite a bit more discretion in looking at an offender's criminal history, taking into consideration their disciplinary record, any programming or educational courses, and any other supporting evidence that would show an offender's progression toward rehabilitation."

Solano says only about a dozen inmates have received sentence credits on a "provisional" basis so far under the new system, and those credits will become official after each inmate's file is reviewed. She says no inmates have reached their parole date yet under the new system. Local law enforcement agencies will be notified when an inmate who received sentence credits is due for release, she says.

Because the system is new, some aspects are still being implemented, Solano says, noting that the department isn't allowed to give information about particular inmates over the phone. Solano says anyone wishing to inquire about whether a relative or friend can receive sentence credits should look the inmate up in IDOC's online database, where the inmate's projected parole date will be adjusted to reflect any credits awarded.

Solano points out that the supplemental sentence credit system was approved by both houses of the Illinois General Assembly with bipartisan support and has been endorsed by many criminal justice organizations, including the John Howard Association. JHA and others supported the system because of concerns that Illinois' state prisons are overcrowded. The inmate population is currently at around 49,300, Solano says. That's higher than the combined design capacity of the prisons, which is about 31,000.

For more information, visit IDOC's website at www2.illinois.gov/idoc.

Contact Patrick Yeagle at pyeagle@illinoistimes.com.

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It just makes me upset to read that the Govenor is releasing prisoners from the prisons because of over-crowding, but my niece applied for Felony Exspongement for something she did over 20 yrs ago and can't get a reply to her. She has been a productive adult for 20yrs and made a good life, but for her to move-up in the Company or change careers she needs the Govenor to clear her. She has been waiting for over 4 yrs and nothing!!!! Wow really needs a release her or these guys that are waiting to get out and do the same crime over and over??????



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Yes its wrong that they don't clear peoples past history especially when its been over a long period of time but don't take it out on other inmates because its a lot of people in prison for petty crimes, like drugs.....that's why I'm glad they have drug court now....if it was up to me people would only go to jail if they harmed someone...robberies ect..anything that has something to do with putting someone else in danger. The government puts people away because they are mad they can't get a piece of the drug money. Drunk drivers are murderers because they kill people but they will never take liquor off the he shelf cuz they can tax it. I never heard of a weed head killing no-one. Anyway I hope your niece gets that removed...everyone makes mistakes...some people have to keep paying the price all their life...she needs a preacher to write some good words about her and send it in...my guy took a preacher with him and it helped. Trust Me.



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