

Justice with respect

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LUDLOW — One of the most innovative and influential thinkers in this state is a gray-haired, old-school pol of 71.

Hampden County Sheriff Mike Ashe Jr. is as traditional as they come in some ways. He's entrenched in his job, having been elected seven times — six unopposed — since 1974. A master of the mutual back-scratch, he's no stranger to patronage (he recruited his brother to help him run the place). All roads to statewide office go through his annual clambake.

Which is why it is so jarring to sit across from Ashe as he picks at a ham sandwich and tells you how he thinks a corrections system should work.

“If they can walk out of here,” he says of his inmates, “and say ‘Hey, these people are for real, I’m valued as a human being,’ they feel like they’re worth something.”

As soon as Ashe starts talking, the politician recedes from view, and the visionary social worker who got the job 37 years ago appears.

Together with his much-admired brother Jay, Mike Ashe has created one of the most forward-thinking jail systems in the country. Others have done some of the things he has done. But Ashe has taken more risks, and had more firsts, than just about any of them.

“He’s way ahead of the curve all the time,” says Molly Baldwin, director of ROCA, a nationally-known, Chelsea-based intervention program for very high-risk youth. She recently opened a Springfield ROCA outpost, largely because of Ashe.

Most of his 1,500 inmates are substance abusers, a quarter are mentally ill, few have high school diplomas. Ashe reckons you have no hope of correcting their behavior if you don’t tackle those things.

All Hampden County inmates — even those awaiting trial — have to do mandatory counseling, education, and job training. Ashe demands a 40-hour week of rehab, therapy, training, and work (sewing, building furniture, upholstery). Fully 330 of those released last year went on to community college.

Ashe brings in folks from the community to counsel and treat inmates, so that their care can more easily continue after release. And he brings inmates into the community: Fully half of those sentenced serve some time outside the fence.

In 1986, Ashe introduced the nation's first day-reporting program, where inmates sleep at home but participate in intensive programs with daily supervision. It's jail time, minus the walls, the overcrowding, and the expense. And it usually works. When it doesn't, Ashe — no patsy — hauls inmates in. As one of Ashe's program directors puts it, "This is not hug-a-thug."

"You want to play games, tell us the time and the place," he says.

His department follows inmates after release, too, to "protect the investment," connecting them with housing and jobs, so they're less likely to reoffend. He puts them to work building houses and doing landscaping cheaply for cities and towns.

Spend a couple of hours in his lockup, and it's clear that almost everybody is working toward Ashe's goals, including correction officers and inmates. Respect fills the corridors.

"I been in five, 10 county jails," said one inmate in a class Monday. "When I came in, I said 'What are these people, Christian?' They don't even swear."