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## Panel: 'We have to do something different'

### State's jail system topic of area forum

BY ALEX LANG The Dominion Post

Several area dignitaries spoke about the need for more community correction programs and less emphasis on immediate incarceration at a Community Coalition for Social Justice forum about the state's regional jail system.

"They're going to be somebody's neighbor," Defense Attorney Rich Gutmann said. "You want them to be good citizens."

When people go to the North Central Regional Jail, there are few options for rehabilitation, and prisoners serve their time and are released back into society, Gutmann said.

Gutmann was one of several panelists who spoke at the forum, "The Regional Jail: Justice for Mon County." The jail is in Doddridge County, about 70 miles from Morgantown, and houses inmates from Monongalia, Marion, Harrison, Wood, Wirt, Tyler, Doddridge, Pleasants and Ritchie counties.

Other speakers were Linda Shaw, a mother of a former prisoner, Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer, DMonongalia; Larry V. Starcher, a former member of the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals; Paul Sheridan, deputy attorney general for the Civil Rights Division of the state attorney general; Circuit Court Judge Russell Clawges; and Mon County Sheriff Al Kisner.

All of the speakers stressed the need for improved use of alternative punishments for criminals. They applauded programs such as home confinement, drug court and substance-abuse treatment instead of sending nonviolent, first-time offenders directly to jail.

Kisner said he supported the use of community corrections. He added many of those sent to jail are good people who made a mistake. He hopes the county and state continue to develop programs like the drug court.

"I certainly hope so," Kisner said. "We have to do something different than we've been doing in the past."

All of the panelists stressed that public safety was the top priority, and some people need to be sent to jail.

"I view the regional jail as a necessary evil," Clawges said.

He said though the regional jail system has done some good, it has also created some new problems.

For attorneys and family members, it can be difficult to find the time or money to travel to the jail. Monongalia County is farther away from the jail than any other county it serves. It can also affect scheduling for the courts.

"Monongalia Country got the short end of the stick," Clawges said.

Shaw had a unique view of the regional jail system because her son spent 10 months at the facility.

While housed inside, Shaw said her son had to face his own challenges. Some nights, he slept on the floor because of the overcrowding. The jail also had strict rules about who he could contact and what type of mail he could receive.

Getting in contact with her son could be very difficult, Shaw said. She had to accept costly, collect calls to talk to him by phone. If she wanted to make the trip, it was 140 miles round-trip. Sometimes she would travel there only to find that visiting hours were cancelled because the jail was on lockdown. Having a regional jail closer to Morgantown would ease the burden on families, would help solve the overcrowding and would provide better access to treatment services, Shaw said.

"I think we need another jail closer to Morgantown," she said.