

PETOSKEY News-Review

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Gardening over jail time



Jack Adams of Petoskey oversees the community garden outside of Brother Dan's Food Pantry. Although his commitment to the community will end in August, Adams plans on staying on to see the garden through the harvest. (Noah Fowle/News-Review)

By Noah Fowle News-Review Staff Writer
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A new Emmet County community service/work release program is budding with success this summer.

For certain offenders, the opportunity to work in community gardens is being offered in lieu of brief jail stays, as well as a means to pay back the courts for monitoring, such as electronic tethers.

According to probation/parole manager Anthony Peters, the goal of the program is three fold: to offer certain offenders an opportunity to give back to the community, to save tax dollars on jail stays and to help replenish the stores of local food pantries.

"We're calling it 'cultivating a better citizen,'" Peters said. "It's physical labor, but it's better than digging a ditch or working around the court house. They take some pride in it."

It costs about \$35 a day to house an inmate in the local jail, and so far about 20 offenders opted for the garden work, saving the county more than \$2,000 since the program was launched this spring.

"We're only in July," Peters said. "If the trend keeps up, we'll save thousands of tax dollars and give something of

value back to the community at the same time.”

The program is offered only to select, non-violent, parolees released from prison who must still serve out a sentence and probationers.

Peters explained the idea sprung from a similar program used in neighboring Otsego County and follows the agenda of the state's other prisoner re-entry programs. Peters also attributed its success to a working partnership between the local sheriff's department, the office of community corrections and area churches. Gardens have been planted on plots of land at Petoskey's St. Francis Xavier Church, Agape Baptist Church, United Methodist Church, The Church of Christ and the First Presbyterian Church of Harbor Springs. Peters said there has already been interest among other churches, and he expects the program to expand further next spring. Both Lowe's and Home Depot donated tools for the workers, and that Gruler's Farm Supply gave other supplies as well as important gardening tips.

“Everything has been donated for the most part,” Peters said.

Cindy Snider, the work release coordinator for the Emmet County Sheriff's Department, said she is pleased with the work performed thus far.

“The plants are up and green,” she said. “And there doesn't seem to be many weeds.”

The planted crops include corn, tomatoes, green beans, cabbage, potatoes, green peppers, melons and onions. The program received the seeds for these crops from Camp Lehman's gardening program.

“I didn't know if 60 flats was a lot,” Peters said. “It turned out that it was, but we planted all of it.”

Dr. James Mitchum the pastor at United Methodist Church said he was also been pleased with the program's progress.

“We have a lot of volunteers from the church working with these folks,” he said. “For us it accomplishes two goals. The church is always looking to be in the lives of people who need another influence and there's a whole lot of hunger out in our community.”

Food from the gardens will be either donated to the church's own pantry, the Manna Food Project or the Nehemiah House.

Jack Adams, 25, of Petoskey, began working in the garden outside of Brother Dan's Food Pantry to pay back the cost of his electronic tether. Early on he was at the garden a couple of hours a day and also volunteered during Tuesdays at the pantry. Although Adams' official commitment will finish on Aug. 5, he plans to see the harvest through to its finish.

“I wanted to do something for people that needed help and I wasn't going to stop helping hungry people just because my tether was paid for,” he said.

Adams said although he was not familiar with gardening prior to starting the project, he picked up the work quickly and enjoys it.

“The plants were all yellow at first, and I thought I killed them,” he said. “But it turns out this soil is great and it's doing awesome.”

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