

Gratiot's revived jail program gets results

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By GREG NELSON
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A program designed to help alleviate prison and jail overcrowding problems is starting to work well in Gratiot County.

The Office of Community Corrections was re-implemented by the county board of commissioners a couple of years ago at the urging of Sheriff Rick Beracy.

The program, which offers alternative sentencing options for certain offenders, had been disbanded several years earlier because it was not working as intended.

Now, however, its seems to be making headway.

Zachary Sylvain, 23, of Midland, who earned his bachelor's degree from Central Michigan University and previously served as a drug tester for the juvenile court, started part-time with the OCC in July but became full-time program monitor in November after his appointment was approved by county commissioners.

"I think it's going very well," he said.

The OCC is funded with a \$45,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Corrections.

"Being a new county we have to reapply every year," Sylvain said. "Once we show we are stable, and follow through every year, we can apply for a three-year grant."

Presently the program has 15 participants with one more waiting approval, he added.

Only criminals charged with non-violent crimes are eligible. Repeat offenders or those charged with sex offenses or other more serious crimes cannot take part.

"The goal of the program is reducing the number of offenders going to prison or jail," Sylvain said.

He works closely with probation officers, judges and the jail administrator getting referrals.

Alternative sentencing options include community service or serving jail time only during the day.

In addition, there is a "cognitive skills" program called "Thinking Matters" that inmates can participate in to get their sentences reduced.

Sylvain is also looking at applying for state funding to purchase electronic monitoring equipment, such as tethers, that

would allow certain prisoners to serve time confined to their homes.

An advisory board comprised of representatives from the county Board of Commissioners, Community Mental Health, jail, district, circuit and juvenile courts; and a local attorney, help set guidelines for the OCC.

Both Sheriff Beracy and Jail Administrator Lt. Lynn Phillips are impressed the job Sylvain has done.

"It seems like he's getting his feet firmly cemented over there," Beracy said. "We are seeing some progress and the judges are buying into it. We are happy to see that."

Phillips agreed.

"It has helped (reduce overcrowding)," he said. "The state likes to see a lot of stats and during 2008 it saved us 198 (inmate) bed days, so it is working."

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