



March 11, 2009

Ingham Co. jail inmates may opt for house arrest

Prisoners pay \$8 or more daily for electronic tethers

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MASON - For as little as \$8 a day, some Ingham County Jail inmates now can sleep in their own beds.

A new program, which began Jan. 19, allows qualified nonviolent inmates to choose house arrest, their whereabouts monitored 24 hours a day by an electronic tether they wear, rather than be held at the jail.

And there is no direct cost to the county. The program is funded through fees paid by offenders who use it.

It is intended to help ease overcrowding at the Mason facility - a longtime problem that typically leads to hundreds of inmates being released each month before they complete their sentences.

"It enables us to free up more beds for the people who truly need to be in jail," said Ingham County sheriff's Chief Deputy Greg Harless.

Qualified inmates who have served 50 percent of their sentences may opt for electronic monitoring at home. Also eligible are qualified inmates waiting for their cases to go to court. A judge now can set a bond or give the person the option to pay for electronic monitoring.

The program is available for people charged with or convicted of most nonviolent crimes.

An inmate has to be able to pay for the program, which typically costs between \$8 and \$16 a day, depending on the person's monthly income. There also is a \$45 enrollment fee.

Harless said the eventual goal is to have more than 100 inmates using it.

Those charged with or convicted of criminal sexual conduct, assault and other violent crimes are not eligible to be released on electronic monitoring. The jail lists more than 125 offenses - from arson to home invasion to unlawful possession of a firearm - that are not eligible for the program.

Inmates set free

Last year, the jail set free 2,011 inmates before they completed their sentences, in order to not exceed the maximum allowed by the state. The jail's capacity is 665, although the county rents 193 beds to the Michigan Department of Corrections, leaving 472 beds for the Ingham County courts.

The jail houses people sentenced for misdemeanors, as well as nonviolent felonies. Also, anyone awaiting trial or sentencing for any crime, who is not free on bond, is held at the jail.

As of Friday, 22 people were enrolled in the program. Six successfully completed it. Three did not and were re-jailed.

Ingham County Chief Circuit Judge William Collette said having jail beds available allows judges to fully punish people convicted even of misdemeanors, such as spousal abuse and drunken driving.

"When you lose that ability, I think society goes downhill," he said.

Calif.-based service

A California-based company, Sentinel Offender Services, runs the electronic monitoring program. A center in Irvine, Calif. keeps track of the electronic monitoring devices at all times. A case manager for the company is based at the jail.

The monitoring device, a tether, is strapped to an ankle. If the person goes too far from home, the monitoring center is notified, then authorities are notified.

People, however, can be eligible to go away from home - to work, church or the grocery store - during pre-arranged times of day.

Violators are sent back to jail and lose credit for the time they spent on electronic monitoring.

Another option for electronic monitoring is to have a global positioning system that can track an offender's every move. With the GPS system, the offender must carry a cell phone, which communicates with the ankle bracelet.

The phone and the bracelet have to be within so many feet of each other, said Amanda Bergquist, case manager for Sentinel Offender Services.

Although the monitoring is restrictive, "they get to sleep in their own beds and eat their own food," Bergquist said.

Additional Facts

Tether fees

- Fees begin at \$8 a day, but can increase depending on the inmate's monthly income. The typical range is \$8 to \$16 a day. There also is a \$45 enrollment fee.
