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# Maine Pretrial Services leaves empty beds at Knox County Jail

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ROCKLAND (Oct 23): Maine Pretrial Services is keeping the vacancy sign hanging outside Knox County Jail.

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"They've helped us out a lot," said Sheriff Donna Dennison on Tuesday. "It seems to be working."

MPS' pretrial program is for people who have been arrested and are awaiting trial. The program is but one of the options county officials are using to curb overcrowding at the 16-year-old facility, located off Park Street.



A jail cell. (Tina Shute)

"January and February will tell the true story," Dennison said of the bed counts at the jail. Those are the peak months for numbers of inmates.

MPS has contracted with the county since June 2004 to provide pretrial and other alternative sentencing programs. Recently, commissioners also signed a contract with Restorative Justice, which offers a mentoring program aimed at keeping prisoners from returning to jail after they are released.

MPS programs here are managed by two full-time caseworkers. Presently, Richard Robbins, a former jail administrator for Knox County, and Todd Butler, a former chief deputy for the Knox County Sheriff's Office, are the caseworkers.

The purpose of the programs is to reserve bed space at Knox County Jail for only those people "who really need incarceration," Robbins said in an interview last week. Another aspect of the program is rehabilitation.

"Jail is really a valuable resource," Robbins said. "It's an expensive operation."

The cost of housing a jail prisoner varies from about \$85 per day to approximately \$115 per day, Robbins said, depending on "how you count your beans."

Knox County's two-year contract with Maine Pretrial Services, which ends Nov. 30, 2008, costs \$115,751. The two-year contract with Restorative Justice, which ends June 30, 2009, totals \$48,000.

The county has been struggling to deal with overcrowding at the jail and with having to board prisoners at other jails around the state. Last year, boarding costs reached roughly \$464,000. To date this year, the cost is \$158,000 for boarding out inmates.

In recent months the prisoner counts have been lowering. The jail was designed to accommodate about 55 prisoners, but a few months ago, the county got a state variance to house up to 80 inmates, Dennison said. On Monday, the inmate count was 42, she said.

Presently, MPS has about 50 contracts with various individuals who are either awaiting trial or are involved in another aspect of the program.

"They're definitely worth what we're paying them and then some," said Maj. John Hinkley, jail administrator.

In 2007, from April through August, MPS saved 6,352 bed days for the Knox County Jail, according to information provided by MPS. This number of bed days multiplied by the daily cost of housing an inmate (\$85) equals \$539,920.

The caseworkers are managing four different programs — Pretrial Services Release and Supervision, Home Monitoring Release and Supervision, Deferred Disposition Supervision, and Administrative Release and Supervision — all aimed at keeping people out of jail.

Pretrial Services Release and Supervision requires an extensive intake process that begins with a referral, oftentimes initiated by a district court judge.

Once the caseworkers get involved, they contact the district attorney to gather discovery information about an individual's charges and the alleged circumstances surrounding those charges.

The prospective clients are interviewed and screened for possible participation in the program. The caseworkers gather background information on where the person lives, where they intend to live if accepted into the program, criminal history and information regarding victims. All of the data gathered by caseworkers is weighed to determine if an individual is appropriate for supervised bail and if they meet the requirements of the bail code.

It's a balance of public safety and flight risk, Robbins said, and a matter of "can we supervise them."

"We're concentrating on individualized supervision," he said. "They really do have to pass the straight-face test."

If a person meets the requirements and agrees to sign a contract spelling out conditions, the plan goes to a judge for approval. If approved, a copy of the contract is provided to the jail and dispatch so that if a person on supervised pretrial release has contact with law enforcement, their conditions are known.

Conditions may include reporting requirements, drug and alcohol restrictions, random search and testing for substances, and so on.

The other three programs managed by MPS involve people who are serving jail sentences.

To be considered for home monitoring release and supervision, inmates must have an approved residence, must be enrolled in an acceptable educational program or be employed, and must have served at least one-third of their jail sentence.

Home monitoring allows a person to finish out their jail term at home under strict guidelines and random monitoring that requires personal contact with the caseworker at least three times a week. If any terms of their MPS agreement are violated, the client may be immediately returned to jail.

Deferred dispositions are for first-time offenders, who have been sentenced.

Generally, these types of deals involve a felony charge. If the person abides by the terms of the MPA agreement, the felony charge or charges may be reduced to misdemeanors or may be dismissed if they successfully comply with the program.

Administrative release involves an outright dismissal at the end of the MPS contract, which is usually for a period of six months to one year.

"Conservatively, [MPS] saves [Knox County] \$600,000 a year," Robbins said. "It's actually generated some money as well," he said, because clients on deferred disposition and administrative disposition pay supervision fees.

Those fees amount to a couple of hundred dollars per month, he said.

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