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Tracking inmates by GPS

By TIFFANY REVELLE The Daily Journal

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Fewer inmates populate the Mendocino County Jail these days, but the decline has nothing to do with crime statistics, according to correctional deputy Heather Roberts.

She's in charge of the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office's home detention and work release programs, which allow inmates convicted of non-violent crimes and sentenced to county jail time to stay at home and work.

At last count in late-October, there were 70 people in the work release program and eight who wore ankle bracelets in the home detention program.

"That's 78 people who would otherwise be in jail," Roberts said. "Normally we're overcrowded."

The programs' benefits go well beyond the space-saving aspect, she said. It costs the Sheriff's Office \$91.15 daily to house each inmate at the jail. The savings from the two programs add up to about \$7,109 per day.

The programs are funded by participants, not by taxpayers, jail commander Capt. Tim Pearce notes.

Roberts called the programs "a win-win," because they allow non-violent offenders to pay off their debts to society while keeping their jobs and contributing to their community.

"They want to be back with their children and family,

so that's been a big deal," Roberts said.

Home monitoring

An eligible inmate must pay a \$50 hookup fee and \$25 per day to wear an ankle bracelet and be monitored via GPS at home.

Looking at a digital map on her computer screen that shows her where all of the jail's ankle bracelet wearers

are -- including one in Los Angeles -- Roberts explained how the home monitoring program works.

A representative from the San Francisco-based company that provides the technology, Leaders in Community Alternatives, comes from Santa Rosa every Monday and attaches the cellular GPS tracking devices to eligible inmates' ankles.

To be eligible, an inmate must have been sentenced to a year or less in the county jail, have no violent crime on his or her record and follow jail rules, among other requirements.

If the inmate has a job, work hours are arranged. No trips to the grocery store or other errands are allowed, except for on a weekly "free day."

Roberts visits the home to get the lay of the land, checks for alcohol or drugs in the home and talks with the inmate's family.

Going outside a certain radius assigned by LCA can warrant a call from Roberts to come in and serve the remaining sentence at the county jail.

The inmates also come in for weekly urine tests "no matter where they live," according to Roberts, and are subject to random search.

The bracelets are cellular GPS tracking devices that use cellular towers to report their position throughout the day. They can go in the shower, and need daily charging. When Roberts' computer shows her inmates' tracking devices have 70 percent battery power or less, she calls them to remind them to charge the devices.

Guests aren't allowed unless they are "just in and out," according to Roberts. That part of the program is on the honor system, but the requirement that no alcohol or drugs are allowed in the home is checked periodically during home visits.

Work release

Participation in the work release program costs \$10 per day, which adds up to no more than \$450 per person. To be eligible, a participant must have a sentence of 45 days or fewer in county jail.

The idea is to allow non-violent offenders who are eligible to keep their jobs while also working off their sentences at local non-profit organizations that need the help.

"Most of them (participants) are working-class people who just want to get this time out of their way," Roberts said of the jail's 70 work release program participants.

The number has increased from 35 in August, and Roberts says she's trying to raise participation.

To qualify, a person sentenced to 45 days or fewer in the county jail for a non-violent crime fills out an application and agrees to work eight hours a week at one of a list of non-profits throughout the county.

"We get very good feedback," Roberts said of the work program.

In Ukiah, the list includes the county animal shelter, the Redwood Empire Fairgrounds, Goodwill, Plowshares, the Ukiah Food Bank, the Ukiah Senior Center and the county buildings and grounds maintenance crews, among others.

Tribal organizations, schools, city governments, the Humane Society in Redwood Valley and the Covelo Fire Department are among the organizations throughout the county that partner with the jail to allow the inmates to pay their debt to society.

"Most (participants) are from DUI cases, and they have to pay their fines, but they can't do that if they're not working," Roberts said.

So inmates can stay in their homes and commute to their places of employment and to the non-profits where they are assigned to work off their sentences. They get a call from Roberts if they miss a day or two of their assigned work. If they need an extension, they apply.

"Now they're out there working at places where they would otherwise have to fire people," Roberts said.

The program is in demand, she said, and her time is largely spent following up on applications.

"I can get 10 applications a day," Roberts said, adding an average is four or five per day.

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