



County hopes ankle monitors can ease jail overcrowding

Sheriff plans to test the idea with 10 offenders

By MIKE MORRIS

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Ten convicts soon could serve their sentences from home under a Harris County Sheriff's Office pilot program that will tag them with GPS ankle monitors.

The program, approved unanimously by Commissioners Court last week, is the county's latest stab at thinning the jail population. As of Wednesday, the county had 9,850 inmates, including 978 being held in other Texas counties or in Louisiana due to lack of space at the downtown lockups.

"Ankle monitors for certain prisoners make a lot of sense so that we don't have to bring them into the jail and use up jail cells for them," County Judge Ed Emmett said. "The frustrating thing is, that idea's been around for years. Finally, we're getting to it. It's about time, and I'm glad we're doing it."

Electronic monitoring is common but rarely has been used in lieu of a jail sentence, said Caprice Cospers, the county's director of criminal justice coordination. Last year, 883 people were monitored electronically by the county's Supervision & Corrections, Juvenile Probation and Pretrial Services departments.

The devices are not foolproof. Some probationers have snipped them off and gone on the lam, and others have committed crimes while wearing them. As of February, more than 630 arrest warrants had been issued in the last two years for "tamper alerts" involving Texas parolees.

Sheriff's office spokesman Alan Bernstein acknowledged the risks.

"Even though the county placed almost 900 low-risk individuals on ankle monitoring last year with no known problems," he said, "the sheriff's office is working carefully and slowly on a pilot project in cooperation with judges."

The pilot program will run until Sept. 14. County officials then will consider whether to expand it, said the sheriff's chief administrative officer, John Dyess. Ideally, offenders would be given their monitors at court and never booked into jail, Dyess said.

Choosing who is sentenced to house arrest and fitted with a monitor will be up to the two County Court-at-Law judges and two District Court judges who signed up for the pilot program.

County Criminal Court-At-Law Judge Margaret Harris said she has used electronic monitoring on ill defendants who would have burdened the jail's medical staff, with positive results. She said house arrest

could provide a way for offenders to be punished but keep their jobs and "maintain their positive contacts in the community."

Judge Robin Brown, of Harris County Criminal Court-at-Law No. 12, said she would welcome "house arrest" as another sentencing tool. Brown is not participating in the pilot, but she helped develop the program as a member of the GPS technology workgroup, part of the county's Criminal Justice Coordinating Council.

Read more: <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/7629414.html#ixzz1Qs9neJ5P>