

County approves criminal justice streamlining plan

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Left to right: MGT of America Project Manager Natacha Wagner, MGT of America Partner Allan Pollock, and Hays County Clerk Linda Fritsche at Tuesday's meeting of the Hays County Commissioners Court.

Photo by Sean Batura.

By SEAN BATURA

News Reporter

Hays County commissioners unanimously approved a preliminary 12-month plan to streamline the county's criminal justice system Tuesday, and voted 5-0 to create the Hays County Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee.

The preliminary plan calls for the county, in the next three to six months, to establish a pretrial services program, make more use of personal recognizance bonds, encourage city police to issue citations for Class A and B misdemeanors rather than immediately incarcerate offenders, and to determine the feasibility of implementing an electronic monitoring system as an alternative to incarceration.

Establishing a pretrial services program would involve hiring a pre-trial services officer and incurring related costs. Hays County Precinct 2 Commissioner Jeff Barton (D-Kyle), who was deeply involved in planning the justice system overhaul, said commissioners would determine how much to spend for the new service.

“I don’t have costs in front of me, but in order of magnitude, you’re talking about spending — with fringe, and some office equipment, et cetera — maybe \$45,000 to \$60,000, \$70,000 tops,” Barton said.

Though they have not formally assessed the fiscal impact of implementing the preliminary plan, county officials say they expect to save taxpayers money in the long run if they can streamline the justice system and prevent people from being incarcerated longer than necessary.

On July 20, commissioners voted, 3-2, to pay MGT of America no more than \$22,000 to create the preliminary plan and to help determine the composition and purpose of the coordinating committee.

“You know, sometimes we think, ‘Gosh, we’re spending all this money to get our elected officials and department heads and others together when they should just get together,’” said Hays County Precinct 1 Commissioner Debbie Ingalsbe (D-San Marcos). “But, I think, as we know, sometimes it takes that extra push, somebody to help us come together and coordinate these efforts, and I think that’s what MGT did, and I appreciate that. Because, you know, at times I felt, ‘Should we really be spending this money to do that when we can get them together?’ But it doesn’t work like that a lot of times.”

According to the committee’s bylaws, the group’s goals include: 1) recommending priorities and desired outcomes for the county’s criminal justice system; 2) coordinating the collection and management of data and information related to the criminal justice system, and reviewing and evaluating existing services and programs within the criminal justice system to maximize all resources; and 3) identifying and prioritizing needs and gaps in the criminal justice system and periodically making recommendations to commissioners, criminal justice agencies and other governmental entities about suggested improvements.

Commissioners created the coordinating committee at the recommendation of consultant MGT of America and a stakeholder group composed of officials representing the Sheriff’s Office, District Attorney’s Office, county courts-at-law, district courts, justices of the peace, constables, commissioners court, Information Technology, District Clerk’s Office, County Clerk’s Office, local police departments, Adult Probation Office, Compliance Office, defense attorneys, and county juvenile services staff.

The committee will consist of 17 voting members, including a commissioners court representative, district judges representative, county court-at-law judges representative and other key positions within the county’s criminal justice system. The committee’s bylaws also specify a city council representative, but do not specify which city.

MGT and the aforementioned stakeholder group collaborated to create the preliminary plan approved by commissioners. The plan consists of short, medium, and long-term goals derived from MGT’s Criminal Justice System Assessment and Jail Population Study for Hays County, also known as “the MGT Study.” The study was authorized in July 2009 and substantially completed by MGT in April. The county budgeted \$206,030 for the MGT Study and for a physical assessment of the jail, the latter of which was completed in April by Broadus and Associates (B&A).

The MGT Study recommended the jail be expanded by 96 beds. B&A concluded the jail can be expanded to 700 beds. The JFA Institute contributed to the jail population study.

Hays County paid Guadalupe County \$551,950 to house prisoners between Oct. 1, 2009 and August 2010. Four months into last fiscal year (FY 2010), which began Oct. 1, 2009, commissioners ran out of money to pay Guadalupe County for continued “contract detention” services. Subsequently, commissioners allocated \$300,000 to supplement their \$350,000 contract detention budget. Hays County paid \$264,900 to Guadalupe County for contract detention services in the 2009 fiscal year.

Repairs to the Hays County Jail’s roof and kitchen last fiscal year resulted in more prisoners than usual being housed out-of-county last fiscal year. Guadalupe County’s contract detention fee is \$50 per day per inmate, and former Hays County Sheriff Tommy Ratliff said the charge is likely to increase soon.

In August, MGT Senior Associate Margo Frasier the average county in the state spends \$45 per inmate per day to house prisoners in-county, though she said costs vary widely across Texas. Frasier said it is generally cheaper for a county to house 10 or more prisoners in its own jail. On Aug. 17, HCSO personnel told commissioners that holding people in the county’s jail costs between \$35 and \$40 per inmate per day. “If you free up an average of just five jail bed spaces a day, you earn back \$90-100K for the county,” Barton said. “Ten jail beds a day would double that. And that’s just one small part of pre-trial services. And just one of many recommendations. And, that’s just operating costs. If you delay the time when we need to build new jail beds, that’s more money. If you reduce the number of beds we need when we do build by just 10 beds, you save another \$560,000.”

On May 25, county commissioners voted, 4-1, with Hays County Judge Liz Sumter (D-Wimberley) dissenting, to accept the MGT Study. On July 20, commissioners voted 3-2 to pay MGT no more than \$22,000 to prioritize the MGT Study recommendations and to help create the coordinating committee.

Sumter and Hays County Precinct 4 Commissioner Karen Ford (D-Dripping Springs) cast the two votes against expanding MGT's scope of work. Sumter and Ford had criticized the MGT study and advocated inviting the Texas Commission on Jail Standards to provide a Facility Needs Analysis (FNA). On June 8, commissioners voted, 3-2, against requesting the FNA, with Ford and Sumter again in the minority.

Tags: [Broaddus and Associates](#), [Debbie Ingalsbe](#), [Dripping Springs](#), [Guadalupe County](#), [Hays County](#), [Hays County Commissioners Court](#), [Jeff Barton](#), [JFA Institute](#), [Karen Ford](#), [Kyle](#), [Liz Sumter](#), [Margo Frasier](#), [MGT of America](#), [San Marcos](#), [Texas Commission on Jail Standards](#), [Tommy Ratliff](#), [Wimberley](#)