

# DeKalb launches diversion program as cost saver

By [April Hunt](#)

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The need to save money, and maybe even generate some, has prompted DeKalb County to become the latest Metro Atlanta community to create alternative punishments for non-violent offenders.

People facing reckless driving, shoplifting and other misdemeanor charges rarely end up behind bars in Georgia.

But they cost DeKalb taxpayers nearly \$300,000 every year – money the solicitor-general's office spends to prosecute minor crimes but doesn't get back on fines.

The county aims to save that money by letting first-time offenders pay \$300 to enter its new pretrial diversion program.

The fees go directly to the county general fund. If offenders successfully complete counseling, classes and community service, which they also must pay for themselves, their charges will be dropped.

“We can save money, help clear our judges' dockets and give these people a second chance that hopefully keeps them from re-offending or escalating to felonies,” said solicitor Sherry Boston.

Such programs are commonplace across the region. Atlanta has one of the oldest offerings, with three types of programs depending on the charges.

In Atlanta, about 3,200 people sign up for the traffic program, which focuses on ages 16 to 20. Another 1,000 take part in a restorative justice program, or mental health/addiction diversion program, said Regina Cannon, the court's administrator.

“This is a way to say you made a mistake but we step in and explain how they can change so they don't make one again,” Cannon said. “You get a do-over to restore yourself, and when you do that, you restore the entire community.”

Cobb County took a more focused stance with its diversion program. The alternative is only open to those charged with shoplifting, possession of a small amount of marijuana and those under 21 who are caught using or holding alcohol.

Cobb, whose government services and makeup most resemble DeKalb, has had hundreds participate in just the 18 months it has operated the program.

“This is their first interaction with law enforcement, and we plan to make it their last,” said Cobb Solicitor-General Barry Morgan.

High-minded ideals weren't the only selling point in DeKalb. The county agreed to give Boston's office an increase of \$103,064 to staff the program with two attorneys and two assistants only as a pilot program.

Commissioners expect a report after six months that shows at least 344 offenders participated, which would make the program break even. But even more, they'd like to see a profit, too.

"We expect a report that this is doing what we expect: getting people back on track and putting money in our coffers," said Commissioner Sharon Barnes Sutton, who oversaw review of the program.

It will take 344 participants to break even, but already the first offering of the program drew 155 participants at the end of October. About 250 new people face charges that qualify each month, and Boston said she expects at least half of them to opt for diversion.

Bill Richardson runs one of the classes that some offenders take as part of the program. The Teen Victim Impact Program is for drivers of any age who have been charged with texting while driving, expired tags or other moving violations. His classes feature victims of reckless driving, including surviving family members of those killed in car crashes that didn't involve alcohol.

"Diversion programs work because you reach people about the consequences of what they've done," Richardson said. "More courts are doing this to save money but it can save more than that if we change mind sets."

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<http://www.ajc.com/news/dekalb/dekalb-launches-diversion-program-1220862.html>