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Here come the inmates -- county debates where scarce funding should go

bbranan@sacbee.com

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In less than two weeks, Sacramento County will start assuming responsibility for thousands of inmates and parolees now watched over by the state.

The pending shift has touched off a debate within the county over how to spend millions of dollars also coming from the state – whether to create more jail beds or fund treatment programs aimed at keeping convicts from offending again.

The state budget approved earlier this year gave counties responsibility for lower-level offenders released from prison or sentenced under new requirements. Counties will get offenders convicted of crimes called the "triple-nons": nonserious, nonviolent and nonsexual.

Sacramento County expects to receive about 200 parolees and newly sentenced offenders next month. When the transition is complete in four years, the county can expect responsibility for 2,300 additional inmates and parolees.

Chief Deputy Jamie Lewis of the Sheriff's Department said the number of offenders "scares me."

County law enforcement officials have spent months discussing how to divvy up \$13.1 million the county will receive from the state for this year. They don't expect to take a plan to the Board of Supervisors for final approval until late October.

That means the county will have to use existing resources to handle additional offenders in the meantime. Those resources include jails operating near capacity and a Probation Department that has lost about half its staff in recent years.

Counties with completed plans have taken different approaches. In Fresno County, where a crowded jail has led to thousands of early releases, officials have decided to use the bulk of their new funds to reopen part of the jail.

San Francisco County plans to spend some of its funding on jails, but most of the money will go to alternatives to incarceration, including drug treatment and work training.

Edward Latessa, a nationally recognized expert on community corrections, told a crowd of California probation officers earlier this year that treatment is more effective than

punishment at keeping offenders from committing new crimes. He also said punishment alone doesn't work.

He said the most effective programs work on changing attitudes – which is what Sacramento County's Probation Department hopes to achieve with one of its proposals. The department wants to use cognitive behavioral therapy for offenders who report to a day center.

Such an approach would be more effective than simply putting people in jail, said Don Meyer, the county's chief probation officer.

"This county has been successful at locking people up," he said. "This county has not been successful at stopping the problem (of crime)."

High crime, full jails

A report completed for the county shows the extent of its crime problem.

From 1999 to 2009, Sacramento County had the highest crime rate out of the eight largest counties in California. Sacramento County reported an average of 5,062 crimes per 100,000 residents each year. The crimes were homicide, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, auto theft, larceny-theft and arson.

Gov. Jerry Brown made it a cornerstone of his budget to shift responsibility for lower-level inmates to counties. Since then, state corrections and county probation officials have pushed for more treatment programs as an alternative to locking people up. But some Sacramento County officials said they aren't ready to let more offenders out on the street.

"This is a paradigm shift," said Lewis. "That shift hasn't taken place in Sacramento County."

Sheriff Scott Jones came out against the planned transfer of services earlier this month. He said the plan is underfunded, rushed, and a threat to public safety.

The Sheriff's Department has made two proposals for the plan. One would involve expanding its home-detention program; the other would reopen a section of one of its jails. The two programs would cost \$9 million for the next nine months and take about 70 percent of the funding the county will receive from the state.

Through May of this year, the county's two jails have been near their total operating capacity of nearly 4,600 inmates, statistics show. The department's proposal would add 200 beds at its Rio Cosumnes Correctional Center south of Elk Grove.

Yet the state expects Sacramento County to eventually have an average of nearly 1,100 newly sentenced offenders on any given day – a number that would exceed its jail capacity even with the new beds.

A different approach

Chief Probation Officer Meyer and others say the county will have to find other options for some of those people. Incarceration is costly, and ultimately unsuccessful in stopping repeat offenders, they argue.

The Probation Department has proposed two programs for the plan – the day-reporting center and supervision for suspects released before trial.

As originally proposed, the Probation Department's proposals would cost more than \$7 million. While that figure is being revised, it's likely that the proposals by probation and the sheriff alone would take up the county's \$13 million appropriation for the current fiscal year.

The committee is considering four other proposals as well, made by other local and county government agencies and nonprofit organizations. The proposals address life skills, substance abuse and other issues.

The Board of Supervisors will have the final say on which programs get funding. Historically, supervisors have favored law enforcement over prevention programs.

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Call The Bee's Brad Branan, (916) 321-1065. Follow him on Twitter at [BradB_at_SacBee](#).

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