



Harris County Jail Takes First Tentative Step Towards Ankle Monitors

By Richard Connelly

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Ankle monitors may take the place of jail time for some in Harris County

The Harris County Sheriff's Office is seeking to take a first "baby step" towards using ankle monitors and home confinement to fight jail overcrowding, a spokesman says.

HCSO is asking Commissioners Court for permission to use the monitors on jail inmates who are released on work crews as a way of testing the system.

The experiment will show things like "How quickly can we respond if someone goes outside their perimeter," HCSO spokesman Alan Bernstein tells Hair Balls, adding that it is being done "with the full intent of lowering the jail population by having people confined to their homes, or within 50 feet of their homes, rather than in jail."

Ankle monitors are widely used by the county's probation department, but not by the jail.

County jails in Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas and San Antonio all use them, Bernstein said.

A task force of various criminal-justice types has been studying the question here since the middle of 2009.

Eventually "some hundreds" of jailed inmates could instead use ankle monitors, Bernstein said.

A judge would decide who qualifies, but "the lowest of the low-risk" population would likely be first --



people in contempt of court for child support, say, who work all week and report to the jail on weekends. From that lowest rung on the ladder, Bernstein says, "it will be a question of how high up does a judge want to go?" -- say, possibly, inmates involved with nonviolent misdemeanors.

Besides freeing up space, he says, the monitors would also cut costs. People who have weekend-only sentences have to be re-processed each Friday, including a medical screening with X-rays.

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I can't even imagine that we have the capacity within our Harris County information technology (IT) department to monitor those devices not to mention the capacity within the Sheriff's office to respond to alerts and goofy signals received.

Hope so.

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GP