

Lower jail population saves taxpayers millions



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SAN ANTONIO -- The Bexar County Jail passed a surprise inspection. That's after years of jail overcrowding that previously caused them to fail. Commissioners say fewer people behind bars is not only saving you millions of tax dollars... It's boosting the community, big time.

Currently, the jail's population is just over 3,900. That's about 500 less inmates compared to one year ago, when the jail population was roughly 4,400. Commissioner Tommy Atkinson attributes the reduced number of inmates to the Bexar County Re-Entry Council. The council refers criminal offenders to community

programs that help them stay out of jail.

"When you're in an addiction, your mind does not let you think clearly," said Christine Casarez, who used to battle an addiction to methamphetamine.

It was just a few years ago when Casarez was behind bars for drug possession. Now, she's working for the same program that helped her get out.

"I love the program," said Casarez. "It saved my life."

The Bexar County Drug Court Program offers drug-users an alternative to prison. Case managers and counselors help them become working, contributing members of society... instead of sucking up tax dollars behind bars.

"So far our recidivism rate is between 7% to 11%," said Casarez. "This program works."

Without that kind of treatment, the rate of re-offense is much higher. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, 67% of incarcerated criminals get re-arrested within the first 3-years of their release from jail.

"Here at our family renewal center, we work with about 3,000 formerly incarcerated people each year," said Carol Lockett, Executive Director of Bexar County Detention Ministries. "We provide vocational training, substance recovery, anger management, and support groups," said Lockett.

The services are helping Azalia Eliserio, a former drug offender, achieve her dreams. "I am a full time student at San Antonio College," said Eliserio. "I'm majoring in business management."

Bexar County taxpayers spend an estimated \$84 million a year housing inmates in jail. Commissioner Atkinson estimates society re-entry programs have saved millions of tax dollars in the past few years, by reducing the jail population.