

Montezuma County jail filled to brim

Out-of-custody monitoring to free up space

By Reid Wright
CORTEZ Journal

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With the new year, Montezuma County's big house also is a full house.

The Montezuma County Detention Center is at its capacity of 104 inmates, Sheriff Dennis Spruell said.

Now, county residents must decide whether they want to pay more taxes for a larger jail or look at ways to reduce the inmate population, Spruell said.

As an alternative, local justice officials are forming a pretrial services program, which offers out-of-custody monitoring as an alternative to incarceration while defendants await trial or a resolution to their case – which often takes months.

Under the current system, defendants who post a bond to get out of jail roam the community largely unmonitored, Spruell said.

"If they need to be in jail, that's exactly where they need to be, and we have no problem putting them there," he said. "But some people are not a threat to society. They've just screwed up. They're going to get out anyway. Let's just go ahead and monitor them while they're out."

Spruell estimates 30 percent of those staying at the jail are awaiting trial and unable to bond out.

Not all defendants will be eligible.

"There's some people like first-degree murderers and violent crimes that aren't going to be eligible for pretrial services," Spruell said.

Under the program, a defendant's risk level would be evaluated by detention staff based on a point system.

If they qualify for pretrial services, a judge can offer them a chance to be released on a lower bond but would order them to abide by the program's requirements.

"The program will have a great system of evaluating the risk and need of every client that we have," said county Detention Lt. Vici Pierce. "Based on that, we'll put in what monitoring we think is necessary."

Those who violate the program's conditions could face a minimum additional year in jail, Spruell said.

The program could cost the defendant \$50 a month, instead of costing taxpayers an average \$54 per day to house an inmate at the jail, the sheriff said.

The level of monitoring ultimately would be determined by the judge in a case-by-case basis and could include checking in by phone, substance testing and Global Positioning System tracking bracelets – all to be paid for by the defendant.

Spruell told county commissioners Dec. 12 the program may not save money in the beginning because of defendants possibly reoffending because they are unused to being monitored.

In the long run, he hopes it will lower costs to the taxpayers by reducing crowding and preventing the need to expand the jail.

“We’re going to have to educate the bad guys that we’re serious about what we’re doing,” Spruell said. “So it may cost us a little bit in the beginning, but in the long run, it’s going to save us a whole bunch of money.”

The program will begin for county inmates Jan. 9. The Cortez Police Department is not yet participating in the program with its inmates.

Spruell said the chief judge, district attorney and local public defender’s office have been involved in the process.

“I think it’s going to be a good thing for the community,” he said. “I’m not going to let bad guys out on the streets without monitoring them. It’s being used across Colorado in numerous places, and it’s worked very well. We’ve done a lot of research, trying to work out a program that’s best for our community.”

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