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Montgomery County's inmate population stays constant

Pre-trial release program eases stress on penal system

by C. Benjamin Ford | Staff Writer

Montgomery County's jail population has remained flat, reflecting a national trend highlighted in a recent report released by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Nationally, the number of adults in a state or federal prison or local jail declined by less than 1 percent in 2009 from 2008, the first decline recorded by the Bureau of Justice Statistics since it began tracking the figure in 1980. The 7,225,800 people incarcerated in 2009 was a decline of 48,800 from 2008, according to the federal report

In Montgomery County, the incarceration rate would have grown, but the county has a successful pre-trial release program that monitors nonviolent offenders awaiting trial without keeping them incarcerated, said Arthur M. Wallenstein, the director of the Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation.

The average daily inmate count in the county was 1,069 in 2009, essentially flat from the 1,062 average in 2008, Wallenstein said. At the same time, the number of people supervised without incarceration grew 5 percent during the same period, he said.

"If those people had been in jail, the system would have ground to a complete halt," Wallenstein said.

As the cost of housing inmates collides with state and county budget problems, more jurisdictions are going to seek alternative methods of sentencing and supervising nonviolent offenders, said Tracy Velazquez, executive director of the Justice Policy Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that studies incarceration issues.

"One reason is cost," said Velazquez, who said she expects governments will begin looking at more alternatives to incarceration. Nationally, it costs \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year to house an inmate in a jail.

"What states are finding is they just can't keep incarcerating people who aren't posing a public safety risk," she said.

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