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More non-violent offenders getting home monitoring in Cook County

By Erika Slife

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Cook County judges are giving more nonviolent defendants house arrest as an alternative to jail time under a collaborative push among the county's law enforcement agencies.

The goal is to reduce the jail's population and costs while reducing recidivism rates, county officials said today.

Last year, there were fewer than 100 defendants with electronic ankle monitors awaiting trial, said Steve Patterson, a spokesman for Sheriff Tom Dart. As of today, there were 865, he said.

The uptick stems from a series of meetings this year among the offices of Dart, County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, the chief judge, state's attorney and public defender in order to better run the county's public safety division. Dart and Preckwinkle each will be contributing \$1 million to the electronic monitoring program to revamp and expand the scope of the program, officials said.

"It is important that we work with law enforcement and other groups to ensure that those who are on electronic monitoring have the necessary support to become productive citizens," Preckwinkle said.

Under the current program, judges give house arrest to eligible, nonviolent defendants who can't afford bond while awaiting trial. Sheriff's officers go to the defendant's home, attach a monitor to the defendant's ankle and to a home phone, and the defendant "could sit at home and do nothing while you're awaiting trial," Patterson said.

The new program will include automatic drug testing, and require unemployed defendants to participate in the sheriff's gardening program, boot camp or a vocational program, Patterson said.

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“Rather than have someone simply sit at home, they’re going to come out of the EM program a better citizen,” he said.

The jail has a capacity of 9,300 inmates, with currently 9,100 being held, Patterson said. It costs the county nearly \$143 a day to house a defendant in the jail, while only \$65 for house arrest, officials said.

House arrest could help reduce recidivism rates because defendants would still be able to go to work or school, or take care of their kids and stay connected to their families, county officials said.

“More and more judges are recognizing the need for this,” Patterson said. “We have worked behind the scenes – and so has the president’s office – to help the judiciary recognize the cost savings and obviously it’s working.”

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