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New program aims to put arrestees back on the right track

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Opponents in the courtroom were, Thursday, united inside New Orleans City Hall. The who's who of the New Orleans criminal justice system joined forces to advocate for serious change, the kind that could steer arrestees back on the right track.

"It's not easy to do in every detail, but it has to be attended to," said Jon Wool, Director of the New Orleans branch of the Vera Institute of Justice, during a city council criminal justice committee hearing.

Wool's sobering warning centered on the serious need for fixes within the New Orleans criminal justice system and the process in which courts deal with the countless number of accused, awaiting trial.

"I want to make sure that we're doing something to help this person while they're out," said Leon Cannizzaro, New Orleans district attorney.

Cannizzaro joined Sheriff Marlin Gusman, and Chief Public Defender Derwyn Bunton in advocating for a stronger pre-trial services program in which judges would be provided with more information on arrestees before deciding whether to offer individuals bail or, in lieu of even going to trial, the opportunity to enroll into an education or job training program.

"Say a one page, 10 or 12 question interview," said Wool. "A pre-trial agent interviews everyone who is arrested on a state charge and they then calculate a score based on confirming the information provided by the arrestee and either give a score or recommendation to the judge with regard to release, release with supervision, or not release."

The Vera Institute, a non-profit research group committed to improving justice and safety, has long argued too many people are imprisoned in Orleans Parish, resulting in quite the price tag for New Orleans tax payers; as much as \$30 million a year to incarcerate all inmates, according to Wool. The financial obligation is one that would be cut decreased, he adds, if less people are incarcerated, specifically non-violent offenders.

The argument found traction with the City Council's Criminal Justice Committee Chairs Jackie Clarkson



Putting arrestees on the right track

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Orleans Parish Criminal Court/FILE (Fox 8 News)

and Susan Guidry.

"That's where I think we should be focusing," said Clarkson.

Cannizzaro said his diversionary program essentially provides the same services, but on a smaller scale. Approximately 1,100 people are currently enrolled, said Cannizzaro, that's up from 250 people when he first took office in January 2009. Cannizzaro told the committee he would prefer to enroll closer to 2,000 people if he was given more city funding for additional attorneys.

"If we wait until the defendant gets convicted and he's put on probation to start these programs we have probably lost 6 months, 12 months," said Cannizzaro.

Noticeably absent from the conversation were the judges who ultimately have the final say on arrestees.

"That is a key missing piece of the puzzle and until y'all start demanding the judges sit at this table we are not going to get where we need to go," said Yvette Thierry, chair of Safe Streets Strong Communities.

Clarkson promised to invite the judges in the future, but even so obstacles remain.

Altering the current system would take more manpower and money at a time where the wheels of justice are having enough troubles churning. Cases are plentiful and funding is not.

However, late Thursday, the Department of Justice confirmed to Fox 8 it just awarded a \$467,960 grant to the Vera Institute to begin the very type of pre-trial services reform longed for by area criminal justice leaders.

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