



## New pre-calendar court in Duval jail drawing rave reviews

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By [Paul Pinkham](#)

It's difficult to get police, prosecutors, judges and the public defender all to agree on much, but if early reviews are indicative, a new court docket in the Duval County jail may have done the trick.

The Pre-calendar Court, which met for the first time Thursday, is being credited with saving money, increasing jail space and reducing case loads.

"The benefits to the system, to the clients and to the taxpayers are really immeasurable," said Public Defender Matt Shirk.

The special court is designed to streamline dispositions for defendants jailed on minor, nonviolent third-degree felonies, said Assistant State Attorney Rich Mantei. Rather than waiting in jail for three to four weeks for arraignment, defendants are offered pleas shortly after their arrests in the type of cases that typically are resolved in one or two court appearances, Mantei said.

Those cases include minor felony drug charges, habitually driving without a license and prostitution. Mantei said none of the cases considered can involve a victim and none of the defendants can have a major felony record. In most cases, he and Shirk said, defendants get the same deal they would have gotten a month or more down the road.

In the first go-round Thursday before Circuit Judge Charles Arnold inside a jail courtroom, the 10 defendants all accepted the state's offers, ranging from 10 days time served to 18 months' probation. At \$60 a day for incarceration, Mantei said that saved taxpayers about \$7,200, not counting transportation, medical or other costs.

"It saves everybody who would be involved in the system time," he said. The court is scheduled to meet weekly.

Jail Chief Tara Wildes said the new court benefits the detention center by freeing up beds and eliminating the cost of shuttling inmates back and forth to court. But even when the pre-calendar defendants get jail sentences, it allows corrections officers to use them for community work for the benefit of taxpayers, something they can't do while waiting to go to court, she said.

Ann Dugger, executive director of the Justice Coalition victim rights group, said she hasn't seen the court in action but said it seems like a logical answer to jail overcrowding, provided it sticks to non-victim crimes. She said there always needs to be space in the jail for people accused of violent felonies.

Mantei said the idea for the court grew out of discussions between his office, public defenders and the judiciary about ways to reduce case counts. Chief Circuit Judge Donald Moran asked Mantei to develop a plan, which he did with input from the Public Defender's Office. Sheriff John Rutherford also has been supportive, Mantei said.

"It just relies on everybody cooperating to make it work," Mantei said. "Everybody had a piece of it."

As early as 2009, Moran, Rutherford and Shirk mentioned nonviolent third-degree felonies as part of a solution to jail overcrowding. Moran praised the collaborative effort to come up with the Pre-calendar Court.

"We have to keep our jail population down," he said. "The sooner we can address it, then we're freeing up jail space."

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