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Some credit pre-trial release program with changing life for the better

by Billy Ball

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SANFORD — When Tiffany Pritt was arrested in October 2009, she and her then-boyfriend were in the process of picking up a pair of friends who robbed a home only moments before.

Pritt was 19 at the time, and though two years have passed, she still doesn't like to talk about those times and the list of felony charges that included breaking and entering, possession of stolen goods and larceny. It wasn't her first run-in with the law, she pointed out. The Sanford teen had faced assault charges before and spent time in jail.

"I was hanging out with the wrong people at the wrong time," she said.

She blames her love affair with a repeat criminal offender for changing her life from "daddy's little girl" to accused felon.

"I was head over heels," she said. "I thought I was in love."

Pritt, a Sanford native, is no longer with her boyfriend today and does not associate with her old friends. She says she's just weeks away from obtaining a GED, with the hopes of one day going to college and becoming a veterinarian.

Her charges, after months of legal wrangling and house arrest, were dropped before she was eventually convicted of misdemeanor trespassing.

According to Pritt, Lee County's pretrial release program is the reason for the turnaround in her life.

"If it wasn't for pretrial, I would be in a much worse situation," she said.

Pritt is speaking out now because she and proponents of the pretrial program say it is under fire from bail bond lobbyists and lawmakers, pointing to a still in-the-works bill in the N.C. General Assembly that, if passed as originally written, would bar counties and the state from running the program with public funds.

Pretrial release programs are popular among local government and law enforcement officials who say it releases nonviolent, low-income offenders from jail and spares taxpayers piling expenses associated with packed jails.

But it's less popular among some, including bail bond companies, who say the

initiative has broadened beyond its intended scope, releasing violent offenders and creating mounting problems for law enforcement officers forced to track down pretrial defendants that have fled or violated their court-ordered conditions.

For Pritt, the program required her to complete a six-month, electronically-enforced house arrest in her Sanford home.

Pritt was not allowed to venture more than 10 feet from her home, she said, or an electronic device would notify program coordinators and eventually law enforcement. Also, she was required to phone in to Lee County program coordinator Andrea Currin each day.

If Pritt broke the rules, she would have been promptly returned to jail, officials say.

“I hated it,” she said. “I couldn’t leave my house. I couldn’t even walk my dog.”

Pritt spent the bulk of the six months reading on her porch. The time sequestered away at her home was revelatory, she said.

“It really gave me time to think,” she said. “It let me get my head on straight.”

Calls for change

It’s a different story among bail bondsmen.

Melissa Seiler, president of the N.C. Bail Agents Association and a member of the bail bond industry for nearly a decade, says that stories like Pritt’s are sharing room these days with more and more stories statewide of local programs releasing accused criminals with a history of dangerous and violent crime.

The Raleigh legislation, according to Seiler, is simply “common sense.”

Seiler is among the bail bond industry leaders pressing the case for change in Raleigh, pushing lawmakers to adopt increasingly tougher bail requirements and suggesting that the programs simply aren’t working.

Among the legislation’s chief components is an order to nix the use of unsecured bonds as a condition for pretrial release. Unsecured bonds release prisoners in exchange for a promise to attend court, as opposed to forcing the accused to fork over bail or work with a bondsman.

Proponents of the locally-funded programs say efforts to derail pretrial release are primarily motivated by bail bond businesses rankled by the loss of profits when defendants are released from jail without having to pay a bond.

Money isn't the issue, according to Charlie Pickard, owner of Sanford-based ABC Bail Bonds.

Pickard, a bail bondsman for seven years, is adamant that something must be done to change or squash the pretrial program, but he maintains his stance is not that of a business owner seeking to inject new life into his profits.

"They're just signing themselves out (of jail) when they mess up," Pickard said. "There's nothing there for the state to hold them."

Pickard said a bail bondsman posts someone's bail in exchange for a guarantee that the defendant will show for court, but he argues there's nothing to force alleged criminals from skipping out on a judge if they are released through the pretrial program or with an unsecured bond.

"There's nothing there securing it," he said. "All that happens is an order for arrest goes out and they go back to jail."

Seiler said the end result is an administrative and law enforcement nightmare.

"It creates excessive work for our law enforcement officers to again attempt to arrest these folks, wasted time for our clerks offices in processing unnecessary paperwork and much time wasted by our sheriff's departments in trying to collect the millions of dollars that go into judgment every day across the state," she said.

Supporters of the program, however, counter that perception of a mass, local problem involving fleeing, dangerous pretrial release defendants is simply untrue.

Currin said 97 percent of program members turned out for court in the 2008-2009 fiscal year; 98 percent in 2009-2010. She added that while there are cases of defendants repeating crimes after the pretrial programs, no one released has committed any violent crimes since she took the program helm when it was relaunched in Lee County in 2005.

Lee County Sheriff Tracy Carter affirmed Currin's points, insisting the program is safe and effective.

"The state is crying out for alternatives because state prisons are crowded, probation programs overcrowded," Currin said. "We need alternatives and now they're trying to shut down alternatives."

A new start?

Pritt has heard all of the arguing, but critics of the pretrial program will find

themselves with an adversary in the young Sanford woman.

“I hate for it to be lost,” she said, “because the pretrial program could help a lot of people.”

Pritt believes her turnaround with the program can and has been repeated in others.

The storm may be over for Pritt. She completed all of her pretrial obligations last month, but the outwardly polite 21-year-old still has some dark clouds in her life.

Work is hard to find, no thanks to her prior record. Pritt lost her job at a local Waffle House when she was arrested in 2009, and her earlier conviction for assault has made her a tough sell at Walmart and other department stores.

The money’s not easy, but Pritt is searching for work in one of Lee County’s many industrial factories.

Meanwhile, she’s nursing a black eye that she clearly finds embarrassing, evidence of an altercation with a drunken neighbor who whacked her when Pritt tried to confiscate her car keys to prevent her from driving.

It’s not easy for Pritt, but she said she’s happy with where she is today.

“I don’t regret anything I’ve done in my life,” she says. “Because I’ve learned from my mistakes.”

All of her former friends are in her past now, Pritt maintains. Plus, her boyfriend is no longer a part of her life. Only time will tell if Pritt maintains her resolve to a crime-free life, but she’s quick to say she’s made a commitment to her clean slate.

“My eyes weren’t fully open,” she said. “And now they are.”

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