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Southern New Jersey jail inmates serving more sentences at home, easing overcrowding and saving counties money



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[Southern New Jersey jail inmates serving more sentences at home, easing overcrowding and saving counties money](#) By MICHAEL MILLER Staff Writer [pressofAtlanticCity.com](http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com)

CAPE MAY COURT HOUSE — The Cape May County jail solved its overcrowding problem and saved taxpayers \$1 million last year by letting some inmates serve their hard time at home.

The jail sponsored work-release programs, electronic monitoring and weekend incarceration in 2010 that provided low-cost labor to the county and allowed many offenders to keep their jobs and remain with their families.

It's an alternative that many county lock-ups in New Jersey have already embraced.

"A lot are minor offenders," Cape May County Sheriff Gary G. Schaffer said. "Maybe it's their third time driving on a revoked license. Do they spend 30 days in jail and lose their job?"

The Alternative to Incarceration Program completed its first year in Cape May County in 2010.

Schaffer said keeping these low-risk inmates out of jail saves about \$84 per day on average. It reduces severe overcrowding at the jail that puts sheriff's officers in greater danger and helps various county departments with low-cost labor, he said.

Atlantic County has similar programs, including a day-reporting program, home detention and pre-trial release for suspects who wear an electronic-tracking bracelet.

"We try to be innovative to manage it," Atlantic County Assistant Warden Geraldine Cohen said. "We do extensive screening. We want to be comfortable the nonviolent, low-level offenders we're putting into the community will conform to the rules and won't commit more crimes."

Atlantic County's jail was built in 1984 to accommodate 920 inmates. This week it had 821. The county's alternative programs make arrangements for about another 145 inmates to serve their time at home or work, saving taxpayers thousands of dollars per week, Cohen said.

Cumberland County has been sending low-risk inmates home to serve their sentence for about two years. Cumberland County jail Warden Robert Balicki said the program — which involves electronic home monitoring — creates more of a break-even financial situation.

The real savings occurs through a decrease in inmate medical costs, such as trips to the hospital, he said. "When they have to go to the hospital, the county taxpayers pay," Balicki said.

Balicki said reducing the jail population through at-home incarceration also reduces food-related costs and tension inside the jail by having fewer inmates.

So far, he said, the program has been successful in having inmates serve their sentences at home. "The technology is so good," Balicki said. "It's pretty hard to fool."

The Cape May County jail was built 25 years ago to accommodate 188 inmates but in recent years has held as many as 310 at one time.

The average population last year was 245. This was 10 percent fewer inmates per day than the jail housed in 2009, despite the fact that the jail processed 92 more prisoners in the same period.

"We're still overcrowded. Our count this morning was 215," Schaffer said. "Each year we get hit by state inspectors about the overcrowding issue."

The county plans to build a new jail behind the old one but must first get coastal permits from the state Department of Environmental Protection. The county also has to acquire some land from the U.S. Army National Guard, Schaffer said.

"The process is moving slower than I wanted. It's hit some bumps in the road," he said.

But in the meantime, the Alternative to Incarceration Program is relieving some of the pressure, he said. The Sheriff's Office allowed 53 inmates to sleep overnight at home and go to work through electronic monitoring. Inmates wear an ankle bracelet equipped with global-positioning satellite technology that lets officers track their movements moment by moment.

Several inmates were granted this option because of medical issues such as cancer treatments or pregnancy. "We could restrict someone to a room in their house if we wanted to or set up exclusionary zones," Schaffer said. "They can't go anywhere near a house without triggering an alarm."

Officers checked on these inmates 2,500 times during the year. Only one tried to escape by cutting off the bracelet. He was arrested the following day and charged with felony escape attempt, Schaffer said.

Letting these inmates serve their time through remote monitoring saved the county \$309,000. Meanwhile, the inmates paid \$37,629 in fees for the bracelets, according to the agency's 2010 annual report.

If the inmates break the rules, they are returned to jail or face other consequences, Schaffer said.

Many county inmates also serve on work details instead of wiling away the hours in the jail. These inmates work 7-hour shifts at county facilities such as the zoo, the veteran's cemetery, animal shelter or Crest Haven Nursing Home and go home each afternoon.

The Sheriff's Labor Assistance Program saved taxpayers \$357,964 in labor through 29,032 hours of work in 2010.

Schaffer said his office is very careful about screening applicants to the program to ensure that no violent offenders are allowed on these details.

"They'll never get on the program. We'll never let that happen," Schaffer said. "Nobody will fall through the cracks. If someone even goes a little astray within the program, guess what? We'll yank them and send them back to jail."

The program poses the question about whether these alternatives mete out the same punishment intended by area judges or the public.

"That goes back to the argument of punishment or retribution," Freeholder Ralph Sheets said. He oversees the Sheriff's Office on the freeholder board.

"They're people who made mistakes," Sheets said. "They're not bank robbers. Instead of being incarcerated, they can be a productive citizen and serve their time."

Cape May County's Schaffer said he did not need judicial approval for the programs but presented them to local judges before launching them. Assignment Judge Valerie Armstrong and state Superior Court Judge Raymond S. Batten declined to comment on the program's effectiveness.

But Sheets said it appears to be working as intended.

Perhaps the best gauge of its success will be whether the inmates will commit future crimes. But Schaffer said that is always an issue.

"Two of my boys are Ocean City police officers and they're locking up people I locked up," said Schaffer, a retired Ocean City police officer.

"This is keeping families together. It's not causing more strain on social resources because they can support their families. It's common sense."

Staff writer Thomas Barlas contributed to this report.

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