

Walworth County considers expanding electronic monitoring to save money

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ELKHORN — Jail offers three meals a day, free utilities and the chance to stare at the ceiling for hours.

Drawbacks include orange jumpsuits, loss of liberty and use of tax dollars.

Staying home offers the chance to eat anything you want whenever you want, the ability to keep working and the chance to care for your children.

Drawbacks include buddies with six-packs of beer, the loss of some liberties, paying all of your bills and having to wear a big black bracelet around your ankle.

This spring, inmates of the Walworth County Huber dormitory might find themselves serving their sentences at home because of a newly expanded electronic monitoring program.

“It puts off an \$11 million jail expansion project, improves public safety and meets the county’s budget goals of a zero increase in the budget,” Walworth County Sheriff David Graves said.

It’s an idea that’s already worked in Rock County.

“We first started electronic monitoring in 1998,” said Cmdr. Erik Chellevoid, Rock County Jail administrator. “At that time, we were dealing with some pretty severe overcrowding.”

Rock County started with 10 to 12 people on the system, and has had as many as 105 on the electronic monitoring program.

“We were able to pare down our \$70 million jail expansion to about \$11 million,” Chellevoid.

In Walworth County, officials hope electronic monitoring will allow them to transform a Huber facility into secure jail space through a remodeling project that’s estimated at about \$150,000—significantly less than \$11 million

In addition, officials think they’ll be able eliminate 10 positions in the jail, a change they think they’ll be able to make through attrition.

How will it work?

“The technology in corrections has changed,” said Sgt. Howard Sawyer of the Walworth County Sheriff’s Office. “This will give us a better way to track inmates.”

Huber is a work-release program that allows some inmates to leave the jail during the day for work, medical appointments, community service or treatment for alcohol or drugs.

“Huber itself is a program where inmates are put out into the community, put out for work, put out for appointments,” Sawyer said. “In that fashion, they can manipulate it. They don’t exactly go where they’re supposed to.

“With the technology in those bracelets, we track not only where they are every 15 seconds, we can see what speed they’re traveling at. It gives us a better way to track inmates in the community.”

Bracelets can be programmed with “hot zones,” areas where inmates are not allowed. Once they enter a “hot zone,” an alarm goes off and an officer is sent to pick them up.

Judges decide who is eligible for Huber privileges, but sheriffs have the authority to decide where inmates serve their terms. That means some Huber-eligible inmates might be able to serve time in their homes.

Which raises an obvious question: How is that punishment?

Walworth County Jail Administrator John Delaney responded with a question of his own.

“Let me ask a question: As taxpayers, do we want to lock them up because we’re mad at them, or do we want to lock people up because they are a threat to the community?” Delaney asked.

The judge, in assigning Huber privileges, already has decided the inmate can be out in the community, Sawyer said.

Walworth County Sheriff’s Sgt. Steve Sax noted that electronic monitoring means more—not less—restrictions on inmates’ movements in the community.

“Now, we don’t have any idea where they’re going during the day,” Sax said. “They can’t beat this system.”

The moment an inmate attempts to cut off the bracelet, an alarm sounds and officers are sent to pick up the individual.

In addition, inmates would be subjected to random drug tests and have a “Sobrieter” in their homes.

The Sobrieter is an alcohol sensor that inmates blow into. It’s voice activated, so the inmate can’t have another person take the test for him or her.

“There’s a lot of temptation for those people at home,” Sax said. “One of your buddies comes over with a six-pack of beer, and you have to say, ‘No.’”

And then there’s the cost: A day in the jail for one inmate costs the taxpayer \$65.

Huber inmates at the jail pay \$18 a day toward the cost of their incarceration.

Inmates on electronic monitoring would pay \$17 plus their own food and utilities.

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