

Electronic bracelets a promising alternative for Winnebago County

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ROCKFORD — Tracking an accused lawbreaker with a GPS ankle bracelet for 90 days could cost about \$4,700 less than keeping him or her in jail for the same amount of time.

That's one finding that was presented to the Winnebago County Public Safety Committee today from an evaluation of the potential use of electronic monitoring equipment.

Chief Judge Janet Holmgren and other leaders from the 17th Judicial Circuit Court presented a report to the committee to demonstrate how the technology could be used and what it could cost in Winnebago County.

Holmgren wouldn't recommend whether the county should go forward with electronic monitoring, saying that is a financial decision that must be made by the County Board, but she did say the devices will be a beneficial tool.

"If people know they're being tracked, they may be less likely to reoffend when they're out on supervision, and they won't have to be retained in the jail to ensure that they won't engage in further criminal activity," she said.

The analysis estimates an annual cost of \$300,000 to run a program with GPS equipment. That figure is based on an estimated 250 inmates, likely nonviolent and other low-level offenders, who would qualify to be released with electronic monitoring as a condition of their bond.

Costs come from equipment, supplies and personnel. Three probation officers would be needed to run the program and respond to violations, officials concluded in their presentation.

The estimated daily cost per offender on electronic monitoring is \$13.16, according to the circuit court report. That's compared with \$65 a day to stay at the jail, so the county must consider whether the expense would justify the savings.

Rick Pollack, chairman of the committee, hopes electronic monitoring will be a tool to alleviate the high jail population and save on the costs of incarceration.

Adding the technology will be considered by his committee and the County Board as it develops its budget for the coming year, he said.

The jail population has been cause for concern for county officials all year, leading them to look into the need for electronic monitoring. They've also hired back more corrections officers and studied whether to implement Saturday court or hire more public defenders to help speed the adjudication process and trim inmate numbers.

The jail's population was 974 today and topped the 1,000 mark for the first time earlier this year. The county averaged 856 inmates a day in 2010 and 801 in 2009.

The high jail population, aside from the per-prisoner cost, also has increased medical costs at the jail by about \$10,000 a month, officials said today.

Holmgren said she couldn't predict whether ankle bracelets would ease the jail population.

"Some (other jurisdictions) report a positive impact on jail population. Some report no impact," she said. "We don't know what that's going to look like in Winnebago County ... and whether or not you would see a reduction in jail population numbers."

Winnebago County last used electronic monitoring back in 1992, when the technology was far less sophisticated and reliable. The program was shut down by May 1994 when then-Sheriff Don Gasparini warned that his department wasn't staffed to watch offenders shackled with electronic monitors.

Using probation officers to monitor those wearing electronic bracelets eases Sheriff Dick Meyers' concerns about having enough staff to respond to violations. However, deputies would still respond to violations of the Cindy Bischof Law, which was enacted in 2009 as a means to keep domestic violence abusers away from their victims.

The law allows the court to order an abuser to wear a GPS tracking device as a condition of bail when a restraining order has been violated.

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