

Community work offers alternative to jail time

BY RALPH R. ECHTINAW
STAFF WRITER

A civilized version of "lete that bar, hit that balls" has come to Oakland County, giving 52nd District Court judges an alternative to jail sentences and fines.

Formally called "alternative sentencing," the program involves assigning misdemeanor offenders to community service work and charging them \$15 a day for the privilege.

It's based on the principal of the chain gang, but no one is shackled, the work day is just five hours long, and everyone goes home at night.

"It's a pilot project," said 52nd District Court Chief Judge Dennis C. Drury. "We're still trying to sort out what the effect is, (but) we're moving rapidly. We've done a major turnaround."

Judge Brian W. MacKenzie of the 52-1 District Court oversees the program. He characterized the typical community service job as "hard labor" and said it includes planting trees, painting buildings, collecting trash and even gardening.

There are about 200 people currently serving alternative sentences. They work five hours a day for the benefit of county parks, cities and townships. One group of misdemeanants tends a three-acre garden in Commerce Township under the tutelage of volunteer master gardeners. The food they grow will be distributed to area

charities by the Food Bank of Oakland County.

Because misdemeanor crimes like driving with a suspended license and shoplifting don't always warrant a jail sentence, MacKenzie said, public service sentences are often just the right response.

Furthermore, instead of watching TV in jail at taxpayer expense, misdemeanants are performing valuable service and paying the court for the trouble of supervising them.

And when the sentence is over, MacKenzie said, those who were punished are more likely to feel a sense of satisfaction. "They feel like they've done something creative," he said, adding that a few have continued to work as volunteers when their sentences were over.

The alternative sentencing program was added to the probation department's responsibilities shortly after the department was moved administratively from the county executive branch of government to the 52nd District Court in early 1993.

Under the county executive, the probation department was losing money. County budget director Jeff Pardee said the probation department lost about \$430,000 in the last year it was under the county executive. "The situation was getting worse all the time," he said.

In the year since the 52nd District Court took over the probation department, it has shown a profit of \$60,000, largely through the elimination of four jobs.

Now, says department director Patricia Crane, the department does more with fewer people.

MacKenzie credits Crane, program coordinator Dan Brock and probation officers Sue Garrett, Sue Doyle and Mary Thoms with much of the probation department's nascent success.

Unlike most district courts, which are financially supported by the communities they serve, the 52nd District Court's bills are paid by Oakland County government. The 52nd covers about 60 percent of Oakland County, including Rochester, Rochester Hills, Oakland Township and Troy.

Community service crews range from all over the county. To date they have toiled only in the service of county, city and township governments, but the crews could be made available to charity organizations. "If a non-profit came to us, we'd be interested," MacKenzie said.

However, MacKenzie guards against letting the need for community service drive the court's sentencing decisions. "Good things die as the result of stupid decisions, and we're not about to abuse (this program)," he said.

Valet will park cars at courthouse

BY RALPH R. ECHTINAW
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There's no free strawberries and champagne yet, but you can get your car parked by a valet at the Oakland County Courthouse beginning Monday.

The county government has struck a deal with Four Star Parking Systems of Farmington Hills to operate the service at no cost to taxpayers. Four Star plans to charge \$2 per vehicle. Coupon booklets containing five valet parking passes will be sold for \$5. Physically challenged individuals will receive free valet parking service. The courthouse is located on Telegraph Road in Pontiac.

To use the service, just drive up to the curb in the turnaround on the north side of the courthouse where the veterans memorial is.

The cars will be stored in the lot north of the North Office Building, which is usually no more than half full because it's quite a ways from the courthouse. Officials hope this will free up some spots near the courthouse.

Southfield attorney Michael M. Muller, who appears often in Oakland County Circuit Court, said valet parking might help most on Wednesdays, also known as motion day.

"Obviously there's a parking

problem on motion day," he said. "I'm there every Wednesday, and it's hideous. You have to park a quarter mile away in someone else's lot."

Muller noted that litigants in personal injury lawsuits, who may still be recovering from injuries, would find valet parking a great solution to walking a long way to the courthouse.

Credit for the valet parking idea goes to Mary Ann Henderson, the former secretary of public works director Dave Rosa. Henderson, who retired last year, used the county's employee suggestion program to submit the idea.

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