

County officials seek funds for alternative jail sentence

By PAT MURPHY
STAFF REPORTER

Sometime over the weekend, about a dozen people — facing time in the Oakland County jail — finished a job they started last fall: painting the interior of the 50th District Court in Pontiac.

"They've still got some touching up to do," said George J. Miller, manager of community corrections. "But they repainted the court rooms, the hallways, the whole works."

Painting the court house is part of WAM (Weekend Alternative for Misdemeanants), a program designed to keep nonviolent offenders out of jail. Besides being scarce, jail space is expensive — running nearly \$80 per day. WAM inmates pay \$10 per day to stay out of jail and do community work.

Since August when WAM was initiated, nonviolent offenders have cleaned parks in Southfield and Addison Township, washed and waxed vehicles belonging to the Road Commission for Oakland County and painted the Pontiac District Court as well as the storage area for the city of Lake Michigan.

"They do things that otherwise wouldn't get done because the staff and money isn't available," said Miller. "So far, everybody

seems satisfied with the program."

The program is so successful Miller expects a cordial reception Friday when he — along with county commissioner Frank H. Millard, R-Clarkston, and management and budget director Robert J. Daddow — go to Lansing seeking more state money.

Miller, Millard and Daddow — also members of the Oakland County Jail Task Force — are scheduled to talk with state community corrections officials about getting \$32,000 more for WAM.

"We're also looking for other funds that might be available to help us find alternatives to putting people in jail," said Millard, chair of the jail task force.

The population at the Oakland County jail has been at or near capacity levels for some time, and the jail task force hopes to eliminate — or at least delay — the need to build new facilities.

WAM and other programs that enable nonviolent offenders to pay their debt to society without occupying precious jail space is a crucial focus of the task force, said Millard.

"I look at WAM as a modern day chain gang," said Judge C. Drury of the 52nd District Court in Troy. "It's a chain gang without the chains."

Grant aids prevention of abuse

Oakland County is expected to receive \$331,170 from the state for secondary child abuse and neglect prevention programs up through age 3.

Secondary prevention is offered to a group of families or individuals not on the active Children's Protective Services caseload of the Family Independence Agency, but in need of services to keep the family together.

The money is designed to foster positive parenting skills, improve parent-child interaction, promote access to needed community services, increase local capacity to serve families at risk, improve school readiness, or support healthy family environments that discourage alcohol, tobacco or other drug use.

The grant was among \$2 million awarded statewide, and in addition to \$7 million previously allocated for programs targeting children and families who have been subjects of substantiated Children's Protective Services complaints, low-risk substantiated cases and families in need of other services statewide.

Drury, who is also on the jail task force, said he supports WAM and other community corrections alternatives. "It's probably the biggest user of WAM," he said, "I probably put more inmates on WAM than any other judge around."

Drury admits to putting his share of inmates in jail. "The public expects it," he said, "and in many cases, jail time is appropriate."

"I believe drunk driving is a violent crime," Drury said, "so I'm not hesitant to send people who drive drunk to jail. But there are still a lot of cases in which a program like WAM works for everybody involved."

Cases involving drivers with suspended licenses are a case in point. "If somebody's license has been suspended because he or she is a bad driver," said Drury, "jail time might be appropriate."

"But if his or her license has been suspended because they didn't pay parking tickets, maybe a program like WAM is the best alternative," said Drury. "Maybe everybody wins if they clean parks instead of spending time in jail."

Appointments are made to county parks group

Three appointments have been made to the 10-member Oakland County Parks and Recreation Commission, including Frank Millard Jr. and David VanderVeen, both of Clarkston, and Charles Palmer of Clawson.

Reappointed to a three-year term was Richard D. Kuhn Jr. of Waterford, who has served on the parks commission since 1987. All of the appointments were made by the Oakland County Board of Commissioners.

County commissioner Millard fills the remaining year of a 3-year term held by county commissioner Larry Pernick who died suddenly in 1997.

VanderVeen represents the regional planning commission, and county commissioner Kary Schmidt of Novi and will serve for three years.

Pekky D. Lewis Jr. of Bloomfield Hills was re-elected to a sixth term as chair of the parks and recreation commission. He

has been a parks commission member since 1981 and served eight years as secretary.

County commissioner Ruth Johnson of Holly was re-elected for a fourth term, and Kuhn begins his sixth term as secretary.

Other members include Bloomfield Township Supervisor Fred Korzon, Oakland County Drain Commissioner George Kuhn of West Bloomfield, Nancy McConnell of Bloomfield Hills, and Richard Skarriff of Milford.

The Oakland County Parks and Recreation Commission oversees the operation of the 6,000-acre, 11-park system. Facilities and activities range from two water parks, four golf courses, a refrigerated toboggan run, and dome covered driving range to camping, boating, tennis, nature programs and picnicking.

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