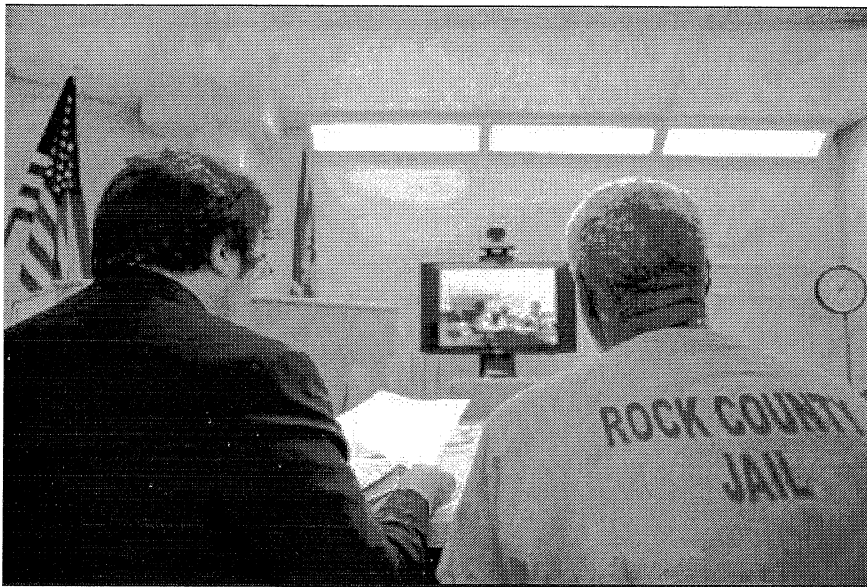


Crime and punishment

Rock County officials plan big changes in how they treat the accused

By Frank Schultz

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JANESVILLE

Fairer, swifter, cheaper.

That might be the motto for sweeping changes being planned in how Rock County's police, courts, jail and probation workers do their jobs.

Dozens of officers, attorneys, probation agents and social-service workers met at Blackhawk

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An inmate at the Rock County jail appears in court via video Friday in Janesville. County law enforcement officials are planning changes in how police, courts, jail and probation workers do their jobs and handle those accused of crimes.

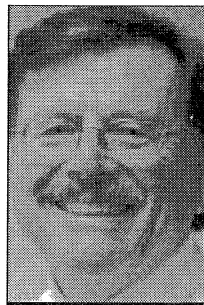
Technical College on Thursday to learn what's in store.

They were told to expect big changes in how people accused of crimes are treated.

Officials have been working for a year to learn what reforms work best and to decide which reforms Rock County needs most.



Moore



Bates

They are on
the cutting
edge of
criminal
justice

reform for the nation, said their guest speaker, Minnesota consultant Mark Carey.

"What we're trying to do here is improve public safety while reducing costs at the same time," Carey said.

That might sound close to impossible, but local officials have bought into the idea that the changes will reduce recidivism—the tendency for people convicted of crimes to commit more crimes.

Officials also plan to increase fairness and reduce racial disparities. Among their specific targets:

10 percent reduction in jail bed days.

By 2020, a 25 percent reduction in the percentage of minorities in the jail. Minorities now populate the jail at rates higher than their proportion of the county population.

90 percent of those accused of crimes, who are judged to be low-risk, will be free until their case is completed. Eighty percent of those people will not commit new crimes and will show up for their court hearings—a better result than under current practices.

Enrollment in diversion programs, which allow defendants to get treatment and change their behaviors to avoid prison, will increase by 50 percent.

By 2018, historically disadvantaged populations will complete court-diversion programs in equal proportion to others. They don't, now.

Cross-agency unity—something Rock County has—is vital to making the changes work, Carey said.

Carey said research shows that 40 percent to 70 percent of what is done to change criminals' behavior does not work.

"That's an expensive mistake," he said. "... All across the country, we are doing harm unintentionally."

For example, offenders who have never committed a crime are often placed in rehabilitation programs with hardened criminals, where they learn how to become career criminals.

But the vast majority of lowrisk offenders would return to becoming productive members of society after a short, separate program aimed at people like them, Carey said.

"They don't need you!" Carey yelled at his audience. "They're self-correcting! ... The very act of getting arrested is enough! The shame, the embarrassment is enough!"

The local group has set a goal of reducing repeat-offender rates for this group by 20 percent.

All these goals will be measured statistically, and the results will be available on a scorecard, officials said.

By spending less time with low-risk offenders, agencies will have more time to concentrate on rehabilitating higherrisk offenders. Spending more time with those offenders is crucial, and despite naysayers, it has been proved that they can be turned away from their criminal-thinking ways, Carey said.

A major part of the effort would be a new county agency.

The agency would assess every person charged with a crime and decide who should to go jail pending court hearings.

Now, a court commissioner looks at each case and decides whether to impose bond. Some are released, while others are held in jail unless they pay the bond.

Judge Alan Bates said that could mean a poor man might sit in jail and lose his job, making his situation more d e s p e r a t e , while a person of means could pay the bond, no matter how much of a danger he might be.

The longstanding practice could be seen as a violation of the Constitution's equal-protection clause, Bates said.

The new agency, independent of the courts or district attorney's office, would decide who should sit in jail and who goes free.

Studies have found low-risk offenders are more likely to commit more crimes if they are held in jail for even a few days, while those let free right away are less likely to do so, according to materials provided at the meeting.

Asked about paying for the new agency, County Administrator Josh Smith said it was too soon to say, but he suggested reallocation of money now spent elsewhere.

Another program would allow some low-risk offenders to go free without ever seeing a courtroom. To qualify, they would have to pay restitution and a program fee and remain offense-free while taking a class.

Such programs are said to reduce recidivism.

This ambitious agenda can be accomplished by applying new research into what works and following the data to track how local programs are making change, Carey said.

But it won't be easy, it'll take time, and it's "not for sissies," Carey said.

One scary part: With more people accused of crimes on the streets, sooner or later, one of them will commit a violent crime.

But the overall benefits to society will far outweigh the risk, Carey said.

Some of the changes could be in place as early as fall 2017, officials said.

One of the changes is already happening in Janesville, where Police Chief Dave Moore, a member of the committee, has started a program in which officers on the street get information as they are headed to a call if the person involved has a serious mental health problem that could make them violent.

Some officers have been trained in dealing with the mentally ill, and Moore and Director Kate Luster of the county's human services department are working out ways to get important information to officers while protecting client privacy.

Moore sees a benefit in making police calls safer for officers and for the mentally ill.

Nationwide, the mentally ill are 16 times more likely to be shot by police than others, Moore said.

The information will flow both ways: When officers encounter a situation that needs attention, they will alert the county department in charge of monitoring those with serious mental health needs.

Early intervention from mental-health professionals could reduce the number of crises officers must respond to, Moore suggested.

The local working group calls itself the Rock County Evidence-Based Decision Making Committee. The title refers to the use of data help in decision making and is an initiative of the National Institute of Corrections, which funded the effort.

The plan may seem ambitious, but people who have worked with criminals for decades, such as District Attorney David O'Leary, are impressed with the potential.

O'Leary was named chairman of the state Evidence-Based Decision Making group in 2014.

Carey noted judges, defense and prosecuting attorneys, the state Department of Corrections, probation agents, mental-health and social-service agencies and cops are all on the committee.

"What you are doing here is phenomenally uncommon," he said.