All in a Day's Work Program

Lisa Burch, CJM

Is your jail facility population ready to burst at the seams? Are you in panic mode? Do you find those sentenced to weekends a headache for staff? Does your community need a little spit and shine? Then we have an alternative program for you.
In 2006, the average daily population (ADP) for Florida’s Lee County Jail was almost 2,500 inmates, but the rated capacity of the facility was 1,633 beds. Although we had just celebrated a ribbon-cutting ceremony for an additional 768 beds, we still fell short of our 2,500 ADP. We also needed to deal with an additional 100 weekenders in our Friday, Saturday, and Sunday head counts. The situation was very scary, to say the least, and projected future population data showed no signs of reduction.

Scrambling to find alternatives to incarceration and combat overcrowding, corrections administrative personnel visited and benchmarked other agencies and their solutions. We quickly realized that a partnership with the 20th Judicial Circuit was essential. We also needed to include the judges, attorneys, and county probation department to succeed. Thus, the Lee County Day Work Program was created.

How the Work Program Works

The day work program provides a sentencing alternative for male and female offenders who qualify for participation in the program. This alternative allows participants to serve their time at home, which helps maintain their family lives and jobs, if they are employed. At sentencing, the judge includes a special condition on the commitment form for the offender to attend and complete a specific number of days in the Lee County Day Work Program. It is strongly recommended for the judge to first inquire, on record, as to whether a defendant has any medical or physical limitations that would exclude him or her from participating in the work program. The offender is required to participate for a minimum of two days per week. Offenders participating in the day work program are limited to individuals serving a county probationary sentence, i.e., misdemeanor offenders.

The day work program operates Monday through Saturday. Offenders generally work a 9-hour day, with a 30-minute lunch and two 15-minute breaks. Participants have various assignments and their manual labor is uncompensated to benefit the community. Lee County Sheriff’s Office deputies and civilian staff, as well as other municipal and county employees, supervise the participants. Agencies not affiliated with the Lee County Sheriff’s Office sign a contract with rules that they must follow regarding offenders assigned to them.

A civilian day work coordinator orient participants to the rules; maintains participant files, court orders, attendance sheets, and scheduled work locations; takes calls and messages; submits letters of noncompliance to judges and probation officers; and documents all statistics. Four certified corrections deputies are each assigned a transport van. All participants report to the county Department of Transportation facility, where they are assigned to a day work deputy or another local agency for the day. Corrections personnel document program participants’ attendance, conduct, and compliance.

The day work program provides services to Lee County government offices, including the Department of Transportation, the Lee County Sheriff’s Office substations, the gun range, Fleet Management, and Marine Unit, as well as two car wash locations for county vehicles. Other agencies served are the U.S. Coast Guard and Lee County Parks and Recreation. Nonprofit organizations include the American Cancer Society, Wounded Warrior Project, Harry Chapin Food Bank, Heritage Food Hub, Goodwill Industries, the Veterans Foundation, and others. Program participants also clean county roadways. In 2013, almost 224 tons of trash were collected.
Program Benefits
From the beginning of the program in 2007 until May 2014:

- 4,547 offenders signed up for the program.
- 3,643 offenders completed the program.
- 827 offenders were removed from the program for noncompliance.
- 470,891 man hours were completed.

Based on minimum wage, the monies saved through the day work program equate to more than $3.2 million. The program has also saved the county almost $4.9 million for nonincarceration in secure custody. Combined, the total savings to Lee County taxpayers equals more than $8.1 million.

Because the program has decreased the number of individuals sentenced to serve weekends in custody, the need for in-house inmate workers (trustees) to work on road detail outside the facilities has been eliminated, thus reducing escape risk and liability from injury. Traditionally, weekenders pose additional strains on the staff responsible for booking the new inmates, searching for contraband, and ensuring that inmates are medically screened. Additional disadvantages to weekenders include increased tax dollars spent on daily sustenance and staff supervision—particularly in the management of their medical needs and emergencies. The decrease in the number of weekend inmates caused by the day work program relieves some of the strain on staff.

To date, no participants in the program have escaped from their assignments. Should an offender walk off the job site, the course of action would be to submit a letter to the sentencing judge for noncompliance and request a warrant to arrest.

Conclusion
This program has proven to be a valuable asset to jail diversion and a facility population management tool. The community benefits from both the labor and savings to the taxpayer. The program also benefits Corrections Bureau reentry efforts to help offenders maintain their jobs and family life in an effort to reduce recidivism.

Lt. Lisa Burch, CJM, has 26 years of correctional experience and has been with the Lee County Sheriff's office for 24 of those years. She is a graduate of the 118th Administrative Officers Course, Southern Police Institute University of Louisville, NJCA Graduating Class 13, and is dual certified in corrections and law enforcement. She is the Assistant Educational Services (Inmate Programs) Commander at the Lee County Sheriff’s Office in Fort Myers, Florida, and can be reached at lburch@sherifflee.fl.org.

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