



Probation Department looks at ATI

Sarah Trafton Columbia-Greene Media February 7, 2019 03:34 pm

CATSKILL — The Greene County Probation Department held a workshop Wednesday to look at existing alternatives to incarceration and gauge their effectiveness.

Probation Director Alan Frisbee, Senior Probation Officer Lisa Grasse and Marcela Hoyos, business development manager of Rocky Mountain Offender Management Systems, the company that provides electronic monitoring devices for the county, gave the Greene County Legislature insight into the workings of the county's ATI system is working.

The presentation began by looking at three devices the county uses to monitor offenders. "These devices are not for everyone," Grasse said. "Part of our jobs is to identify the right device for the person." Some offenders may be too reckless to use any device effectively, Grasse said. The probation department receives most of its referrals from the Greene County District Attorney's office and through the Drug Court.

"It's not for everyone," Grasse said. "We don't want to waste time and put the community at risk." Some offenders don't take the chance at rehabilitation, Frisbee said. "Some people would rather be in jail and serve their time," Frisbee said.

People under the influence often need to be pushed to get the help they need, Grasse said. "Until you force their hand, they don't know what they want," she said.

Hoyos showed two alcohol-monitoring devices to the legislators: a SCRAM bracelet and a portable breathalyzer. SCRAM is the acronym for Secure Continuous Remote Alcohol Monitor. "The SCRAM bracelet is 24/7 bracelet that takes a reading of the probationer's transdermal alcohol content every 28 minutes," Hoyos said.

The transdermal alcohol content is the alcohol that is released through a person's pores after the alcohol has been metabolized and emitted from the body. "The devices will record violations if the person tries to tamper with the device and will report them to the probation officer," she said. Violations are court-admissible, Hoyos added. "This is already established technology" she said. "It isn't being tested. The probation officer can testify about the violations."

Legislator Michael Bulich, R-Catskill, asked how quickly police could be notified to stop a drunken driving incident. "The SCRAM bracelet is a passive tool," Hoyos said. "Unfortunately the person has to finish the drinking event for it to be admissible." The SCRAM bracelet is water-resistant, Hoyos said. "They can shower and go to the water park but they can't swim — it can't be submerged," Hoyos said.

SCRAM bracelets are not ideal for diabetics or women who are pregnant, Grasse said.

"The most resistance [to wearing the bracelet] is within the first week," Hoyos said, adding that people stop noticing the device after a period of time.

"People find that it deters them from drinking," Grasse said.

Legislator Matthew Luvera, R-Catskill, found the device helpful for a former student, he said. "The student wants it on for the next four months because he knows it will help him," Luvera said.

The breathalyzer device is different from the traditional device installed in a vehicle, Hoyos said. "Probationers can put it in the purse and take it with them wherever they go," she said. The probation officer sets a schedule for the offender's readings, Hoyos said. "When they blow into the device, it takes their picture and location," she said. If the photo does not match the individual, a notice is sent to the probation officer to verify it, Hoyos said. "If they miss a test, we have a

record of when and where their last test was," she said.

The final device Hoyos showed to lawmakers was a GPS monitoring device, which tracks an offender's location. "The probation officer can set exclusion zones such as their victim's house, their drug dealer's house or the store they robbed and inclusion zones such as treatment, work and probation."

Of the 16 offenders using the three electronic devices in 2018, 13 are considered successes, according to data from the probation department.

Another way of monitoring offenders is through urine testing. The probation department conducted 6,800 drug tests in 2018. "It's not our favorite part of the job," Frisbee said. "People come try to come in with Visine bottles and we have to ask, 'Show me how you use your eyedrops.'"

Probation officers make about 800 to 1,000 home visits per year, according to data from the probation department. Legislators asked about ways the county could improve the probation department's ATI program. "What is the biggest challenge you face?" Legislator Jack Keller, R-Catskill, asked Grasse. "Manpower," Grasse said. "We need one more person to expand on this."

The department has nine probation officers, and Frisbee estimates that their load is about 40 cases each. A decline in state funding makes it more difficult for the probation department to expand, Frisbee said. "We have less state reimbursement and more regulations," he said, adding that the reimbursement rate is down to 9 percent.

The 2019 budget for the probation department is \$1.3 million. The cost of hiring an additional person was minimal compared to the savings from the ATI program, Keller said. The probation department reported \$680,840 in savings from 2016 to 2018 by keeping offenders out of jail. The cost of jail would have been \$85 per offender per day.

Former lawmakers Lori Torgersen of Windham and Aidan O'Connor Jr. of Durham attempted to expand the county's ATI program in November, after several requests for funding allocations to new initiatives at the annual budget hearing Nov. 5. O'Connor made a motion for an amendment at the Finance Committee meeting Nov. 19 to include \$330,000 in the budget for ATI, as recommended by the county's Alternatives to Incarceration Task Force in September 2017.

The funding would create three new positions — a criminal justice coordinator and a case manager at an annual salary of \$50,000 each, and a support navigator position at \$30,000, according to the proposal drafted by Torgersen.

The motion failed to get a second and was not included in the 2019 budget.

Legislators Larry Gardner, D-Hunter, and William Lawrence, R-Cairo, said the proposal came at the last minute and that additional ATI programming will be looked at this year. The probation department also has a lack of work sites to send offenders to for their community service requirements, Frisbee said. Luvera asked if contracting with a rehab center to reserve beds for the county would be beneficial. "We have a moral obligation to help these people who are willing to take the help," Luvera said. Offenders rarely have long wait times for beds, Grasse said, adding that insurance issues also come into play.

"Sometimes we get a patient down there just to find out their insurance will only cover three days of treatment and then we have to bring them back," she said. "It can take 60 days for them to get Medicaid. Sometimes we have to lock them up for their own safety."