

The Courier

FINDLAY - HANCOCK COUNTY - NORTHWESTERN OHIO

Probation department works to keep people out of local jail

By: Eilleen McClory, Staff Writer - The Courier | Posted On Mon. Sep 18th, 2017

David Claflin, a probation officer at Findlay Municipal Court, keeps in his office a crudely-made device that was smuggled in by a man on probation in an attempt to cheat on a urine drug test.

But the man was caught in the act.

In municipal court, those on probation must submit to a urine test in a small bathroom with a two-way mirror. Claflin, watching through the mirror, saw the man fumbling with the device, which had a urine-filled balloon attached to a straw, and Claflin asked the man what he was doing.

Those who try to cheat on drug tests can be charged with obstruction of justice, a fourth-degree misdemeanor.

Drug tests are one of the tools the municipal court probation department uses to track the progress of people who have been convicted of crimes and put on probation by the court. The tools are important to the court, the probation officers said, because they keep defendants accountable while keeping them out of the overcrowded Hancock County jail.

GPS trackers, in the form of an ankle bracelet, are another probation tool. The bracelet records a person's location, and sends that information to a computer. Zones are set up on a computer, and a parolee has to stay within the zones.

If they don't, probation officers will try to contact the offender and may issue a warrant for their arrest, Claflin said. The consequences vary, but can range from a judge sending an offender to jail to increased visits from probation officers to an offender's home and work.

Dave Beach, director of court services and chief probation officer at municipal court, said the GPS units, which are rented, cost a defendant about \$8 a day. Indigent defendants may not have to pay, depending on court rulings.

People convicted of drug abuse may be issued a drug patch, which sticks to a defendant's skin and absorbs their sweat, which reveals drug use. Defendants pay \$42 per patch.

Some defendants try to trick the patch by sticking a needle under it to insert something between their skin and the patch. But if people try to trick it, it's obvious they have broken the terms of their probation and can be charged, Claflin said.

The person wears the drug patch for as long as it stays on, or for a specified period, and then it is packaged and shipped to a drug lab for analysis. Testing costs the court between \$25 and \$37.50.

Testing for alcohol consumption uses a similar method, although the device looks more like a GPS tracker, said Morgan Greeno, another probation officer in the municipal court. The ankle bracelet, called a SCRAM unit, costs defendants \$56 a week, unless they are indigent.

The unit reads the sweat of the person wearing the bracelet to test their alcohol level, and vibrates every few minutes.

The court has used these units since 2014.

When the court was first considering the units, Beach wore the SCRAM unit at his daughter's indoor softball game.

"It was hot in the gym and I wore that and I got some weird looks, especially from people that knew who I was. It was kind of fun, actually," Beach said.

The SCRAM unit is hard to trick. Beach said some people try to, by putting thin socks under the unit or rolling a sock over the bracelet, but these methods don't work as it's obvious when the unit has been tampered with.

Ultimately, though, Clafin said devices like the SCRAM unit work best for those who are willing to stop drinking. The unit can only hold people accountable, he said. It doesn't work for those who don't care they are on probation and continue to drink.

Beach recently ordered another 10 SCRAM units and three more GPS units, due to the demand the court faces for using those tools.