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Community Corrections leases equipment to keep citizens safe

MARCH 04, 2020

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Wendy Parks and David Stevens show some of the technology the Community Corrections department recently obtained from SCRAM Systems to monitor offenders. Photo by Krystal Moralee

LAPEER — Prosecutors, judges, law enforcement and other court staff met in the commission chambers Monday afternoon to learn about some new equipment that will be utilized by Community Corrections to help keep the community safe and hopefully get offenders through the system and on the path to better choices.

Community Corrections is leasing two GPS ankle units and eight Continuous Alcohol Monitoring (CAM) ankle units, and

representatives from SCRAM Systems were on hand Monday to talk about the features of the equipment and answer questions.

What they were finding, according to Assistant Community Corrections Coordinator Wendy Parks, is that people who were waiting for a hearing for a drunken driving charge would already be out getting another one.

“It’s something we decided we needed,” she said. “If they were on equipment, maybe we could prevent that, and it helps keep the community safe.”

The CAM unit is a breathalyzer that gets strapped to the ankle, and it administers 48 tests a day — one every 30 minutes — based on the insensible perspiration of ethanol vapors through the skin. The continuous nature of the testing means people can't beat the test like many do when they have to go in for a standard breath test.

The sensitive equipment tests environmental factors that could throw a test off before the alcohol test is given. It measures for obstructions and equipment tampering as well. The Transdermal Alcohol Concentration (TAC) is collected and should an offender measure more than 0.020 for three continuous recordings, a potential drinking event is reported. From there, specially trained data analysts will take a look at the information the CAM is providing and determine if there has been tampering, environmental contamination, or if there has been a drinking event.

Thanks to years of research, dozens of independent studies and a number of court cases, the CAM readings have been determined to have a miniscule margin of error and are admissible in court.

"We give every reasonable benefit of the doubt to the wearer of the bracelet," said SCRAM Account Manager Nathan Spielbusch.

The bracelets have been found to provide an incentive for many wearers, and if they find that a wearer is still drinking, they know some deeper substance abuse help is needed.

"It's a really strong deterrent and when you merge that deterrent with the appropriate amounts of treatment, it is very impactful," said Chris Barstad, regional sales manager for SCRAM. "It's a tool to be used with other tools you have. It's not a magic cure-all."

The CAM bracelets also have a house arrest feature that sets a boundary for the wearer.

For higher-risk offenders, the GPS bracelet will drop a pin every minute indicating the wearer's location, and it can be programmed to allow for home, workplace and a specific route to and from work, for example. The location reports are then consolidated and any out-of-boundary marks are noted. A vibration or an audible tone can be sent to the unit remotely to warn the wearer.

"These people know they're being monitored and hopefully that's enough to stop them from the poor behavior," said Community Corrections Coordinator David Stevens. "It definitely can help (keep people out of jail) and at the same time it definitely keeps the community safe."

Community Corrections is leasing the equipment, and the monitoring fee that is charged whenever one of the units are used must be paid up-front by the offender who will be wearing it.

Mike Slater, parole and probation supervisor for Lapeer and Sanilac counties said they have been using SCRAM equipment for years, and it has definitely been a help.