

Pre-trial release program provides bond opportunities to Augusta inmates



By Sandy Hodson



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There was a time not long ago when a murder suspect would rarely get to remain free on bond pending trial in the Augusta Judicial Circuit.

But timing made a difference in the case of Reginald Wright, 57, who is accused of murder in the Nov. 6 death of 54-year-old Dennis Adams.

Before COVID-19, the Richmond County jail generally held about 300 people awaiting trial on felony charges. These days, there have been around 1,000.

"I began looking at the possibility what can we do to alleviate that," said Superior Court Judge J. Wade Padgett.

The difficulty in granting bond is that a judge generally does it without the benefit of oversight, Padgett said. It's not unusual to see a person in court for one drug charge who picked up two or more arrests while free on bond in the first case, Padgett said. But in the Augusta Judicial Circuit, there wasn't any option but jail or freedom.

Elsewhere in Georgia, judges do have another option: pre-trial release. With the help of court administrator Nolan Martin, Padgett set up a pre-trial release program with CSRA Probation Services.

The program is set up with three levels of supervision:

- 1) The person on bond reports to a probation officer, who ensures any bond conditions are being followed (cost \$35 a month).
- 2) The person on bond must wear a tracking device for alcohol consumption, for example (cost \$6 a day).
- 3) The person is bound to electronic monitoring to keep close tabs (\$8 a day).

The cost is paid by the person on bond. Because of that cost, the bond amount can be lowered, Padgett said.

With the jail population rising and costs soaring, the Richmond County Sheriff's Office was ecstatic about the idea, Padgett said. Besides the cost to house and feed inmates, there are prisoners with serious and expensive medical issues.

The pre-trial supervision gives a judge some security, Padgett said.

"I can order all the things you hear us do, but now I have a mechanism to check," he said. "This will allow us to let more people out on bond."

In Wright's case, defense attorney Hollie McManus argued that he was physically assaulted on his own property by a stranger he feared was next going to go after an uncle who has to use a wheelchair. Wright had no criminal history and had remained steadily employed. Padgett granted a \$20,000 with electronic monitoring.

"I don't know what the jury is going to do with him," Padgett said, but there seemed no good reason for Wright to remain behind bars for three years waiting for a trial.

Georgia law on felony bond

A person charged with any offense which is bailable only before a judge of the superior court may petition for bond. A court shall be authorized to release a person on bail if the court finds that the person:

- (1) Poses no significant risk of fleeing from the jurisdiction of the court or failing to appear in court when required;
- (2) Poses no significant threat or danger to any person, to the community, or to any property in the community;
- (3) Poses no significant risk of committing any felony pending trial; and
- (4) Poses no significant risk of intimidating witnesses or otherwise obstructing the administration of justice.