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Program Helps Offenders Re-enter Society

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By Rayma Silvers ~ Herald-Tribune

Fort Scott, Kan. -- Thirty years after legislation made it possible, a rehabilitation program that began in the Sixth Judicial District, encompassing Bourbon, Linn and Miami Counties, continues to help offenders find ways to become productive members of society.

In 1978, The Community Corrections Act was passed, making it possible for adult felony offenders and juvenile offenders to receive rehabilitation services while being closely monitored by community correction officers.

Offenders who are placed on Intensive Supervised Probation by the District Court must abide by a stringent plan, which offers "solution-focused case management services that assist the offender to become a productive member of society," according to a written document provided by Sixth Judicial District Community Services Director Bill Vankirk.

According to Vankirk, ISP is more structured than standard probation programs. One difference in the two programs is the number of times an offender must meet with his or her probation officer during the week. Initially, an ISP participant may be required to meet with his or her officer a minimum of three times per week, depending on the circumstances. ISP offenders are monitored in various ways, Vankirk said.

"This probation provides a high degree of offender monitoring in the form of a high number of offender contacts, field and home visits as necessary, drug screening, electronic monitoring, and a high degree of contact with area law enforcement agencies," the written document said. "By providing highly structured supervision for felony offenders, we hold them accountable to their victims and the community."

Typically, Vankirk said, those offenders who have a criminal history will be assigned ISP rather than a standard probation sentence. Adding that the specifics for each ISP sentence varies according to the needs of each individual going through the program. For those offenders who struggle with drug or alcohol abuse, the probation program will ensure the individuals get the counseling services needed through qualified agencies. In addition, the officers follow up to make sure the offenders have been accessing those rehabilitation services.

For those offenders who are unemployed, ISP helps them learn how to seek employment through its Work Force Development program. In this program, individuals are taught how to develop resumes and other employment related skills. In addition, offenders are taught how to get passed any barriers preventing them from obtaining employment, such as having a felony conviction on his or her record.

ISP also offers a Life Management program to some of the offenders in the program. Through this 16-week course, individuals are taught about health, exercise, finances, and various topics which promote self-sufficiency.

When asked what the program's successful outcome would be, Vankirk said upon probation termination the offender would be employed, have a residence, be alcohol and drug free, and all restitution would be paid. If at the end of the probation sentence, the offender has not met these qualifications, Vankirk said, Community Corrections will take the matter before the judge and ask for a re-evaluation of the situation.

According to the written document, the Sixth Judicial District was one of the first jurisdictions to begin the ISP program. At first, there were only nine counties in the program. However, in 1989, the Act became a mandate for all counties. In 1994, juvenile services were included in the Act as well.

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