

TUESDAY
OCTOBER 27, 2009

EAGLE TIMES

Drug rehab program to save county thousands

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Having an in-house drug rehabilitation program at the Sullivan County jail will save the county thousands of dollars per inmate in secure jail bed and transportation costs, Ross Cunningham, superintendent of the Unity facility, said recently.

On average, a Sullivan County inmate who is sentenced to undergo residential substance abuse treatment waits 120 days for a bed to become available at a treatment facility, either in Keene or Bethlehem, Cunningham said. While they wait, county taxpayers pay about \$76 per inmate, per day, to house them at the jail, which translates to about \$9,120 per inmate.

The new Sullivan County Community

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Corrections Center, which is currently under construction at the county farm in Unity, is expected to cut the average wait time for residential treatment from 120 days to six days. Cunningham has said beds at the CCC will cost taxpayers several dollars less per day than secure jail beds, but an exact cost-benefit analysis has not yet been completed.

In addition to cost reductions related to wait time, the availability of the CCC should eliminate costs associated with transporting inmates to facilities to Keene, which is about an hour from Unity, and Bethlehem, which is about two hours away.

Studies have shown that about 80 percent of Sullivan County inmates have some

kind of substance abuse problem, and a high percentage — 77 percent of males and 90 percent of females — commit new offenses after they're released from jail.

Cunningham and Sullivan County Attorney Marc Hathaway have said the CCC will address the reasons behind these statistics.

Ultimately, the goal of the CCC is to begin to reduce the jail population through rehabilitation and a continuum of services designed to transform repeat offenders into productive members of society, Cunningham said.

"What you'll see, in my hope, is a more successful person coming back into the community," he said. "They'll be standing on their own two feet and

paying their taxes."

Excavation work in preparation for construction of the CCC is currently under way. Contractors' bids for construction, electric, plumbing and mechanical work are due at the Sullivan County Commission on Nov. 2.

Meanwhile, Cunningham, Hathaway, Jan Peterson, the managing attorney for the public defenders offices in Sullivan and Cheshire counties, and Jane Copeland, program director at the jail, are meeting regularly to begin fleshing out a new sentencing structure for criminal offenders in the region.

Cunningham said the group would present a proposed sentencing structure to local judges in January.

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