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DOC makes pitch for a treatment center at jail

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Unity

The county delegation of state reps. heard from members of the Sullivan County Department of Corrections Thursday, as well as two county judges and residents of Unity regarding the proposed community correction center (CCC).

The delegation will vote on the new center, which would treat inmates with substance abuse problems, on August 14.

"The existing jail, which was built in 1978, was originally intended to house 44 inmates," said corrections ssuperintendent Ross L. Cunningham. "We are housing between 90 and 100 inmates at any given time."

The new treatment facility would provide 68 more beds and include a drug and alcohol treatment program.

The CCC would cost an estimated $5.64 million, and with the proposed renovations to the current jail, it would bring the total to $7.1 million. Most current jails, like the one being built in Chesire County, cost between $38 and $45 million.

"This is the most cost effective option that we have," said Cunningham. "If we can treat these inmates so they don't return, but instead become taxpaying members of society, it would free up space."

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Trying to prevent inmates from returning is the main objective of the CCC. In a study compiled by the Sullivan County Department of Corrections from 2006, male inmates had a recidivism rate of 77 percent, and females had a recidivism rate of 90 percent.

When treated in a transitional housing unit, only 31 of 153 inmates, or 20.26 percent, ended up back at the county jail.

The Sullivan County Department of Corrections also found that 89.47 percent of male inmates abused drugs or alcohol. When it was a female inmate, 91.67 percent had abused drugs or alcohol.

Male inmates were found to have been arrested an average of 6.79 times before their current incarnation, while females had been arrest 1.91 times.

"When someone is sent to jail for six months, or a year, they don't learn," said Cunningham. "They just sit in their cells for a year, and they don't improve."

Representative Carla Skinder, D-Cornish, also echoed her sentiments on the current jail system being ineffective.

"When someone is shipped off it tears apart families, and if we can prevent people from going back, we could prevent that," said Skinder.

There was also consideration that the center could curb adolescents from repeating their mistakes, and following in their parent's footsteps. In a survey by the Sullivan County Department of Corrections, they found that 18.18 percent of the current inmates had children who were involved with the legal system.

Unity residents voiced their concerns about increased traffic, and what housing more inmates could mean for the town. One resident suggested that if there were satellite facilities throughout Sullivan County, inmates would not have to drive as far to receive treatment.

"I feel that Unity is a safer community because of the jail," said Skinder. "There is an increased police presence in Unity. And that's something I wish we had in Cornish, or Plainfield, because there has been an increasing number of robberies in our area."

Residents were also concerned that if the center is built, then more inmates, and possibly dangerous ones, will be shipped in from all over the state, then released in to the community.

"Not everyone is eligible, only non-violent offenders are eligible," said Cunningham. "And roughly 80 percent of the inmates we receive are non-violent."

Inmates at the proposed CCC would be able to serve 90 days if they completed the program. They would then have their sentence suspended for two years, pending good-behavior.

Cunningham said that the CCC will save Sullivan County money, because it will reduce the number of times an inmate is processed. The county has been straddled with a deficit for two years.

Currently, inmates must wait up to four months for treatment. There is no treatment facility for female inmates with substance abuse problems.

"This is a much more cost-effective way of treating the problem," said Cunningham. "We won't have to pay for an entirely new jail that won't solve the problem."

The delegation will vote on the project on Thursday, August 14, at the Ahern Building in Unity.

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