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City rethinks use of jail beds

Crime - Portland may expand treatment for re-offenders but pull money from the jails

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Since 2006, Portland has paid Multnomah County \$1.3 million a year to reserve up to 57 jail beds for criminals who make a habit of selling drugs, stealing cars and committing other midlevel crimes in the city.

Boosters say the program, dubbed Project 57, has been a sterling success: Rearrest rates have dropped 71 percent among the more than 400 chronic criminals who went through the program, which offers many the option of drug treatment, according to police Officer Jeff Myers.

So Portland is thinking of expanding the program. But the city will probably pull back from the county at the same time, moving much of the city's \$1.3 million from the cash-strapped jail system.

Two reasons drive the change, Portland Commissioner Randy Leonard said: The city wants to focus more on addiction treatment for repeat offenders because drug and alcohol abuse drives a lot of their crimes. And the county, he said, doubled the price it wants to charge Portland for jail space.

"We're rethinking the entire expenditure of the \$1.3 million for the beds in Project 57," Leonard said Wednesday. "We're considering not even doing the jail beds anymore."

The City Council approved a first step in the evolution of Project 57, voting to pay \$240,000 to help move the West Women and Children Shelter from its location at the west end of the Burnside Bridge to a nearby building on Fifth Avenue. The city will then pay to put 12 drug treatment beds in the shelter's current Second Avenue space. Portland will pay Volunteers of America to run a treatment program at that site, helping men with a repeat criminal history sent there by law enforcement officials.

The new program should target violent offenders more than the current Project 57, aiming to help them before another arrest, Leonard said.

The city is also helping to fund an intensive day treatment program, said Pam Kelly, a Volunteers of America official. Men brought to the inpatient beds will start the day program when they're ready. When they're more stable, they'll stay in day treatment but get housing and job help from Central City Concern, freeing up a bed for another man, Kelly said.

Mayor Tom Potter, a big fan of the program, budgeted \$524,000 to fund six of the 12 beds in the coming fiscal year. But money for the other six beds must come from somewhere else -- probably the \$1.3 million now going to the county.

County Chairman Ted Wheeler said the county recently doubled the price it charged Portland to reflect the jail's actual costs. The new rate is what the county charges the U.S. Marshals Service, he said. Portland could rent about 30 beds -- what it actually uses -- for \$1.3 million, he said.

The rate increase got Leonard and Potter talking more about changes to the program. Potter told Wheeler on Tuesday that the city may significantly cut the number of beds it rents to five or 10, said Potter's chief of staff, Austin Raglione. Leonard added that the city is "looking for the best deal" and asking other counties if they can rent beds for less in their jails.

Wheeler said it would be tough on the jails to lose much of Portland's payments, but that it is Portland's right to spend the money elsewhere.

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