

WATCH East boasts 99 percent success rate

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After almost three successful years of programming, WATCH East program coordinator Deb Dion said she would like to see some changes to the Administrative Rules of Montana governing the facility.

Dion presented a progress report to the Dawson County Commissioners and the Glendive City Council Nov. 6.

Since WATCH East opened in February 2005, more than 267 people have completed the six-month addictions treatment program. Only two of those individuals have been convicted of another DUI, a 99 percent success rate. More than 73 percent of people who finished the program are in compliance with all aspects of their probation, which varies from two to five years in length. Driving, buying a vehicle, alcohol use of any kind and not reporting to a probation officer are examples of probation violations.

Dion was pleased with the facility's record. "We've been open almost three years. I think we've got a good track record and we deserve what we're asking for," she said. Dion is asking for several changes in the Administrative Rules of Montana, which she believes could provide additional benefits to clients and to the community.

First, the facility would like to increase the facility's capacity from 40 to 42 participants. In the long term, Dion would like to see that capacity increased to 50 clients, the planned capacity of the building. Demand for the program has been steady, and there is a waiting list for enrollment. No additional staff would be necessary to increase the capacity by two, though if the facility succeeds in bringing its numbers up to 50, that is one aspect that will have to be examined.

Second, WATCH East would like to be able to use the outside areas within its fence rather than just the small courtyard. Dion suggested that client work crews under staff supervision could also do clean-up projects around town.

Currently, the administrative rules state that participants must wear easily identifiable clothing. On admission, clients wear red scrubs and eventually graduate to a red polo shirt with jeans. Dion would like to allow participants in the final phase of treatment to wear their own clothing as part of the transition back to their normal lives. This is a perk already allowed by the Warm Springs program, she said.

Another minor adjustment desired by the program's administration is to allow approved visitors to drive themselves to the facility rather than

requiring them to use transportation provided by a contractor. This would free the staff member responsible for transportation to do other things and facilitate transport of disabled visitors. Dion said that the facility has not had any problems with visitors.

Finally, Dion would like to screen for an inmate worker position. Inmate workers are utilized by all of the pre-release and other treatment programs in the state. They are subject to the same rules and conditions as program clients but earn a wage for a 40-hour work week. This worker would assist with outside maintenance and mowing, and in the facility kitchen.

To expand or modify the administrative rules, WATCh East must document the public support of a majority of public officials, including city and county governing bodies, law enforcement personnel, the city and county attorney, and state legislators. A representative survey must also be made of the Glendive community and of the Hillcrest and Georgetown subdivisions. If public support is documented, the department may then conduct a public hearing to amend the rules.

The Glendive City Council and the Dawson County Commissioners both reacted positively to the progress report and to the proposed changes.

Dion said the community at large has been tremendously supportive of the program. WATCh East has partnered with Dawson Community College for a General Education Development instructor who teaches five days a week. In January the first client successfully attained his GED diploma, boosting interest in those classes. DCC also provides instructors for a Life Skills class and for six workshop classes that earn participating clients certificates in Career Development and Life Management. The exchange is advantageous for the college as well as for the facility, because WATCh East clients are counted as full-time enrolled students.

Dawson County Domestic Violence has also committed to providing facilitators to the program. They will lead support groups for survivors of abuse twice per month.

Dion said five local ministers provide church services on a rotating basis, and Neville and Joan Peterson provide weekly spiritual counseling.

No program participant has escaped or attempted escape. In random breathalyzer and urinary analysis tests, no client has tested positive for substances. In room checks, staff has never found tobacco, drugs, or alcohol. There have been no acts of violence. Dion concluded her proposal by saying, "We have been a good neighbor and ask for these changes so we

can expand our positive contribution to the community and increase public safety by providing treatment, which improves the lives of the participants and their families, while making Montana a safer place for all of us.”