

WATCH East looks to expand

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Rick Deady, Treatment Contract Program Manager for the Adult Communities Correctional Division at the Montana Department of Corrections, visited with city and county officials on March 18 to discuss increasing capacity at the WATCH East felony DUI treatment facility.

Deady met with the Glendive City Council, the Dawson County commissioners, District Judge Richard Simonton, the Public Defender's office, and Sen. Don Steinbeisser to discuss expanding capacity from 40 to 50 beds, which requires an amendment to the Administrative Rules of Montana. All of those individuals signed formal letters of support.

According to Deady, the Department of Corrections has seen a clear need for more space in treatment facilities within the state and hopes to expand capacity at both WATCH East and the WATCH West program in Warm Springs, currently a 108-bed facility, by a total of 50 beds. As a felony DUI carries a 13-month sentence and the treatment program is six months long, some offenders are turned away because their sentences would expire before treatment was complete, he explained.

WATCH East screens clients carefully, giving preference first to women and then to men from Eastern Montana. The program does not accept violent or sex offenders. "We absolutely have to look at the capacity issue... These are people who need help with alcoholism and can't get it. We sit here with space for more people but we can't take any more people because we are limited by the current ARM," WATCH East Program Coordinator Deb Dion wrote in a letter proposing the changes.

Surveying local government officials, including city and county governing bodies, law enforcement personnel, the city and county attorney, and state legislators, is the first step in expanding or modifying the administrative rules. Following meetings with those groups, a representative survey must also be made of the Glendive community as a whole and of the Hillcrest and Georgetown subdivisions specifically. Deady said the department should mail out surveys within the next few weeks. If the meetings and surveys demonstrate public support, the department will then conduct a public hearing to amend the rules.

Dion proposed several other changes to the administrative rules, including greater use of outside areas with the facility's ten-foot fence and allowing participants in the final phase of treatment to wear their own clothing as part of the transition back to their normal lives, a perk already allowed at WATCH West.

Currently, the Department is only discussing expanding capacity. Although the other rule changes may be examined in the future, Deady said having more space for treatment is seen as the greatest priority.

More than 267 people have completed the six month program at WATCH East. Only two have ever been convicted of another DUI, a 99 percent success rate. In three years, no program participant has escaped or attempted to escape. Random breathalyzer and urinary analysis test have never turned up positive for substances, and there have been zero 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 contributions to the community and increase public safety by providing treatment, which improves the lives of the participants and their families. When people get treatment for their addictions, it makes Montana a safer place for everyone."