

New START facility opens

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One of Montana's most successful correctional programs got a new home in early August.

The START (Sanction, Treatment, Assessment, Revocation and Transition) program moved from a outdated building at Warm Springs to a new facility near Anaconda, following a grand opening event July 27 that was attended by Gov. Brian Schweitzer and more than 300 local residents.

Corrections Director Mike Ferriter called START "one of the most innovative efforts we have undertaken in the history of Montana corrections."

START began as a pilot project in December 2005 at an aging building near Montana State Hospital. The department always contemplated the program, if successful, eventually would move more efficient and newer quarters.

Community, Counseling and Correctional Services Inc., a Butte-based nonprofit corporation, offered the only qualifying bid for permanent operation of the program in 2008. CCCS operated START since its inception.

Managed under the department's Adult Community Corrections Division, START is designed to divert from prison those male offenders who violate conditions of their community placements.

The goal of the program is to provide a sense of incarceration, coupled with assessment and treatment of offenders' needs, to help them get back on track and return successfully to their communities.

The program monitors and assesses offenders, and offers chemical dependency evaluations and treatment by licensed addiction counselors. After assessments are completed, the staff screens offenders for placement at appropriate community corrections programs. If an assessment determines prison is the most appropriate option, the offender is transferred there.

Since it opened, START has diverted from prison more than 1,500 offenders admitted to the program and returned them to community placements. That 75 percent diversion rate is part of the reason that prison admissions in Montana dropped 12.5 percent in the first two fiscal years that START began.

"Our goal when we started this pilot program was, if we could divert half of the people that walked in the door, we were going to call that success," Ferriter said. "That was the goal I established for the department. Today, we are seeing 75 to 80 percent, so we're definitely meeting that target."

Gov. Brian Schweitzer, who has been a strong advocate for the program since it began, said he recognized it was a risk.

"Governors are very nervous about trying new things in corrections because if something goes wrong, you own it," he said. "But we couldn't afford to allow the prison population to continue to increase. We couldn't afford the cost to the state and to Montana families."

Schweitzer said he sees STAR..

T as part of a corrections system that tries to help offenders live with their families and in their communities, rather than in prison.

"I'm willing to take the risk," he added. Are we going to work to rehabilitate lives or are we simply going to warehouse people? I believe we ought to rehabilitate lives and it's not going to be perfect, but neither is locking them up and keeping them there for the rest of their lives."

CCCS built the 40,000 square-foot building on reclaimed land owned by Atlantic Richfield. It houses 118 offenders, 30 more than START could accommodate at its original location. Ten of the additional beds are reserved for offenders with mental illness. START will have a staff of 55.