

New prison facility in Anaconda...A fresh START

Montana Standard, July 26, 2010

Community, Counseling, and Correctional Services, Inc. is putting the final touches on its new facility for pre-release and probation offenders. Construction is nearly finished on the \$12.3 million future home of the Sanction, Treatment, Assessment, Revocation and Transition, or START, program, located 6 miles northeast of Anaconda off Highway 48.

Grand opening of the 40,000- square-foot building is Tuesday, completing 13 months of work. Offenders in treatment at the current START center in Warm Springs will move early next month.

The START program has operated out of a retrofitted forensic unit on the state hospital campus since services began in 2005, which CCCS Chief Executive Mike Thatcher said is in "deplorable condition."

"It was more cost-efficient for us to build a new facility," Thatcher said.

CCCS contracted with Swank Enterprises, of Kalispell, to build the new space on 75 acres acquired 20 months ago from Atlantic Richfield Co. The location was ideal, with incredible support from Anaconda officials, Thatcher said.

"There were no oppositions to this project, which is unheard of," he said. "Overall, we're excited. It was a great team effort."

OPTION TO PRISON

START services are geared toward men who have violated conditions of their community placement, such as pre-release, probation and parole. It assesses offenders, instead of sending them directly back to prison.

Offenders come to START either on sanction or revocation of that placement. Their stay range up to 120 days, and programs like anger management, life skills and criminal thinking errors help determine when they are ready to reenter the community.

Since launching as a three-year pilot by CCCS and the Montana Department of Corrections, START has maintained a 77 percent successful prison diversion rate, topping its initial goal of 50 percent, Thatcher said.

THE SETUP

The new START facility is split into four living units: two cell blocks, one block with open dormitory-style bunks for lower-level offenders and 10 additional single cells for offenders with mental health conditions.

Capacity could reach 142 regular beds plus an additional 10 for special needs, Thatcher said, though the contract now calls for just 118 beds.

START Administrator George Strutzel said the environment overall is more conducive to the delivery of programs. Staff will work directly in the living units with offenders, giving a level of supervision they didn't have before.

"Staff is more empowered to do its job here," Strutzel said. "They become more familiar with the behaviors of offenders ...the more informed we are, the better decision we can make."

START will retain its 37 employees, plus 14 new jobs totaling \$2 million in annual salary and benefits, Thatcher said. The center will also spend another \$500,000 annually on local goods and services, benefiting Anaconda-Deer Lodge County.

Planning director Connie Ternes-Daniels said she is excited about the local job creation, and START's presence is further proof that the county is shaking off the lingering stigma of Superfund.

"That ground was owned by ARCO, and I think we've demonstrated that, together, we can redevelop Superfund ground and move forward," Ternes-Daniels said.