

NEWSRELEASE

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Corrections plans to make prison diversion program permanent

The Montana Department of Corrections will issue a request for proposals in June to transform an innovative pilot project into a permanent part of the state's correctional system.

The request will solicit offers to maintain operation of an assessment, sanction, revocation, transition and treatment facility. The department will seek a contractor to run the START program, which began at its Warm Springs location as a three-year experiment in December 2005.

START (Sanction, Treatment, Assessment, Revocation and Transition) has been operated by Community, Counseling and Correctional Services Inc. since its inception. The contract expires Dec. 11 and the department will fulfill its obligation to seek competitive proposals for continuation of the program on a permanent basis.

START, managed under the Adult Community Corrections Division, is primarily designed as a means of diverting from prison those offenders who violate conditions of their community placements. The goal of the program is to use a taste of incarceration, coupled with assessment and treatment of offenders' needs, to help them get back on track and return successfully to their communities.

This 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 correct option, the offender is transferred there.

Since it opened about 2½ years ago, START has had 1,657 admissions. About 164 of those were ordered returned to prison by the state Board of Pardons and Parole. Of the remainder, 90 percent were placed in community corrections programs and just 10 percent were sent to prison because they failed START or refused placement at Treasure State Correctional Training Center (boot camp). In the first two fiscal years that START has been operating, prison admissions in Montana dropped 12.5 percent.

“The success of this program is self-evident,” said Corrections Department Director Mike Ferriter. “If not for START, many of those offenders who got into trouble while living in communities would have ended up in prison for costly stays. We believe this is an effective, common-sense and less-expensive alternative.”

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Pam Bunke, Adult Community Corrections administrator, praised the program's achievements in its inaugural years.

"START has been very diligent in working with offenders who are not good candidates for community programs and making this population viable for placement in community facilities," she said. "The START staff's individual attention to each offender coming through its doors has made a difference for the offender in returning to the community and for the department in saving money on secure beds."

START is funded for 88 beds, with lengths of stay varying from 30 days for sanctions to 120 days for revocations and assessments. The average stay is about 37 days. The department plans to ask the 2009 Legislature for funding to expand the program by 30 beds.

The request for proposals (RFP) planned by the department will require existing elements of the program to continue, with two additions. First, the operator must hold and provide treatment for offenders waiting for space in a community corrections program. Second, the operator will have to reserve 10 of the additional 30 beds, separate from the rest of the START population, for assessing and stabilizing offenders with mental health issues to determine if they can be placed in communities with appropriate medication.

The RFP will require relocation of the program from the current building at Warm Springs and mandate that the operator handle transportation of offenders to and from the facility. It will contain no requirement for location of the new facility in a specific community, but department officials noted that the vast majority of offenders under jurisdiction of the agency are in western Montana. The contract, for up to 20 years, will be awarded before the existing one expires in December, and the operator must have the new facility open by October 2009.

As with other community corrections programs, the operator will be responsible for securing local support for the chosen site.

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