

The Daily Record

Overcrowding forcing courts to look at control sentencings

By CHRIS LEONARD
Staff Writer
May 12, 2009

WOOSTER—As prisons and jails become more and more crowded, probation departments are seeing an increase in community control sentencings, forcing them to juggle an ever-increasing caseload.

"We're in a tough situation right now," chief probation officer Cheryl Gerwig said. "Every level of the criminal justice system is basically overloaded."

In 2007, the Adult Probation Department had 320 probationers. In 2008, it hit 400. So far this year, there are 105.

The department recommends to the court the level of supervision, treatment and programming an offender may need, in addition to supervision and enforcement of court orders.

Wayne County Common Pleas Judge Robert J. Brown said with overcrowded facilities, more alternatives are being looked at, whether its Stark Regional Community Correction Center or Mental Health Court.

"We're mindful of that situation. That said, that doesn't change removing offenders who pose a risk to public safety," Brown said.

Judge Mark K. Wiest said an advantage to community control is restitution to the victim, not to mention the community service hours for local organizations.

"If they're in the community, there's a better chance (the victim) will get restitution," he said.

According to Linda Mowrer, community service coordinator, probationers completed 1,600 hours of community service in April, "which is 400 more than we've ever done in a month."

Gerwig said the department, which has a staff of six, tries to target people's criminogenic needs to effectively place them in a program or supervision level.

"We have to do more with less," she said. "We have to be more creative with our supervision styles."

With the increase in community control sentencings, probation officer Cindy Hall, said it means more field work, namely, "more contact with probationers to make sure they're in compliance."

With the closing of the Discipline & Rehabilitation Center on March 1, Municipal Court Judge William G. Rickett said sentencing options are limited.

"We don't have the in-between option we used to have," he said.

The Wayne County Sheriff's Office is seeking nearly \$1.2 million in grant funding to reopen the DRC, which was used to house non-violent offenders.

With the DRC gone, Municipal Court Judge Carol White Millhoan said when sentencing, they try to have offenders go through **Moral Reconation Therapy**, a program under probation, or the HOPE court, a mental health program, for treatment, hoping to reduce repeat offenders.

Since its start in November 2006, 61 people have gone through it, according to chief probation officer Jim DeFelice. Of the males and females to go through the program, 75 percent and 87 percent, respectively, have not re-offended.

In Municipal Court, the probation department saw 928 probationers reporting in December, according to DeFelice. As of May 1, it was up to 1,120 and he expects the number to increase.

"Right now we have four probation officers, which includes myself, that have approximately on average 225 people that report to us at least once a month. The effect, with those type of numbers, is a little less office visits, more phone reporting," DeFelice said. "Those type of numbers, you can't see everyone in your office and do your monthly side jobs."

Reporter Chris Leonard can be reached at 330-287-1643 or e-mail cleonard@the-daily-record.com.