

The Sheriff's Corner  
It's all about the Money!!!!



We have heard that said for the last several years about the Michigan economy and about the West Michigan economy. That statement is true – it is about the money. Interestingly, that can also be said about our corrections system in Allegan County. We average about 165 inmates in the Allegan County jail on any given day. That is not to mention the 490 people who are on **Circuit Court** Probation and Parole and the 760 people who are on probation through the **District Court!!!** Any or all of these people could be ordered to our jail at any given time. It all costs money... taxpayer money.

Yup --- every day it costs us about \$8,000 to operate the jail! That's about \$48.50 per inmate per day (based on an average of 165 inmates). The jail is a mandated constitutional responsibility of every county in the State of Michigan (some smaller jails contract with neighboring counties) ... We at the Sheriff's office keep hearing, "hey- we don't care what it is like in the jail – they screwed up, so let them pay the price". That's the problem, *WE are paying the price!* The factors that go into running a county jail are so deep, and the costs go far beyond the bed, food and secure environment. An inmate doing "County Time" is provided with medical care, counseling services, and GED programming to name a few.

In the jail business, the term we use for a bed that is available for a 24 hour period is called a "bed day". A bed day costs us, as taxpayers, about \$48.50 a day per inmate. Back in 2003 we implemented an aggressive community corrections program – time off your sentence for participating in work programs, self help programs like AA and others like our meth diversion program or getting a GED. In fact, we have had 21 inmates complete their GED while incarcerated in the last year! Think what that does for their ability to get a job after they leave our jail. We have averaged saving 3,800 bed days per year since we implemented Community Corrections. That means we have *saved* \$189,150 per year since we aggressively pursued community corrections programming!!! We make inmates "pay to stay", charge them for being allowed on work release and we charge organizations that use our worker D.E.B.T.S. program. At any given time we have five people on work release, eight people serving on our work crew and six people serving community organizations. Since we implemented aggressive community corrections programs we have averaged jail *revenue* into the general County coffers of around \$118,179 per year!!!

Quite frequently I am asked the question – "Sheriff why do you let them watch T.V.? All you are doing is rewarding them for their bad behavior." Just the opposite is true. T.V. is a privilege in our jail. You earn the right to watch T.V. for good behavior. If you can't keep your cell clean or you can't get along with your cell mates you lose your privileges. In fact, the entire dorm of up to 30 people can lose their privileges because of the bad behavior of one of the inmates. We use T.V., phone privileges and many other things as behavior control methods. We have a whole internal justice system just for inmate behavior. If you can't behave we can take away good time, earned time and any other

programming opportunities. Our corrections staff uses these items to control inmate behavior and also to keep the facility safe for the inmates and staff. The only things we can't take away are food and water, pen and paper, medical care and access to an attorney.

Everybody wants to be "tough on crime". Well, being tough on crime has a cost – a very considerable cost. Besides direct law enforcement (the arrest), there is the prosecution, the court system, and finally the jail costs. So the question is asked; who is in our jail? Contrary to belief, these people are not low level offenders but typically people that have been convicted of crimes such as domestic violence, multiple offense drug crimes, and multiple offense drunk driving and assault. About half of the population is people who have been convicted of crimes. The other inmates are those who have violated their parole and probation or people who have been charged with crimes that have high bonds such as felonious assault, breaking and entering, and murder - offenders that are true threats to the Allegan County community.

We need to build a new facility; a facility that meets modern corrections and building standards. We can't "refit" the existing one – it just won't work. We need to build it big enough so that if you break the law, there are immediate consequences. You break the law you go to jail – NOW!!! - not when we can schedule you a room or after the fourth time you violated your probation. Now don't get me wrong, we need to plan for the future, but use other tools such as jail reentry programs that train inmates how to get and hold a job. We should offer a parent mentoring program so inmates don't go home and teach their kids how to be good inmates when the kids come to jail - but instead model good parenting skills. This may sound like pie in the sky but we *NEED* to do things differently. Right now between 60 and 75 % of our inmate population will come back for a second, third and fourth stay at the Allegan County Jail. *THAT* is money out of our pocket!!! If we can prevent them from coming back, we save money!!! That makes sense to me. As is said, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure". It is much more economical to have programs outside the jail where an inmate is held personally accountable than putting them in a cell where all they do is sleep all day – that doesn't make sense. If you ever wondered what was in your jail – give us a call, we'll take you for a tour. If you wish, you may sit in on one of our Community Lock Up Education C.L.U.E. sessions. This is a program designed (particularly for young people) to see what a day in jail is like and talk to inmates face to face about their experiences in our jail.

Well, that my opinion on the jail situation in Allegan County. In short, be smart; be proactive, economical and practical. We can do it –and we have to do it-we have to do it together. It only makes sense...economic cents!!!

Our next article will focus on law enforcement in Allegan County - who provides it and who pays for it. So, until I write again – Stay Safe....