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Kelley House to offer life beyond drugs, jail

Amanda Iacone | The Journal Gazette

FORT WAYNE – After more than a year of planning, the Kelley House is expected to officially open its doors to its first four residents today.

The two-story building at 2720 Culbertson St. will be home to drug offenders as they tackle addictions or receive treatment for mental illness. County officials hope the residential treatment program will put an end to what can be chronic trips through the court system and jail.

For more than a year, Allen County Community Corrections has been working to convert what was once the Washington House, a privately run drug addiction center, into an alternative sentencing program for offenders who suffer from both mental illness and substance addictions.

The offenders eligible for the Kelley House program are four times more likely to end up back in jail than others, said Stan Pflueger, spokesman for community corrections. They are also expensive inmates who require costly medications, need more nursing care and are more likely to harm themselves, he said.

But when these repeat offenders are placed in a stable environment, the medical staff can help them function and avoid a return to jail.

"It'll be cheaper in the long run. It may not be easier," Pflueger said of the process to help these offenders.

The board of the Washington House gladly turned over its building late last year. Since then, the building has received a new coat of paint inside and out, new flooring, new beds and bedding, and a security system. Walls were taken down to open spaces, and windows and emergency exits were added, Pflueger said.

During their stay, inmates will learn woodworking skills and will likely grow vegetables in the garden in front of the building.

Officials hope to eventually sell the wood products, and the vegetables could be sold at a farmers market, Pflueger said. Any money raised would help pay for the program. It would also teach basic business skills such as ordering supplies and customer service, he said.

Additional offenders will join the first four within a week, after they are sentenced. Instead of a sentence to home detention and electronic monitoring, they will serve their sentence at the Kelley House.

The opening of the treatment center was delayed because plea agreements between the prosecutor's office and defense attorneys didn't include the Kelley House option. Changing those agreements requires more court dates and would have delayed sentencing for other eligible offenders, Pflueger said.

But after a meeting last week, officials decided to open the doors today.

"No matter how big or small, we'll open," Pflueger said. "We decided we need to get going."

The first batch of participants will test the policies, procedures and plans for the center. To ensure their success, the first participants are people who faced only drunken-driving charges and suffer less seriously from addiction and mental illness than others who may follow, he said.

Eventually, the program will house offenders accused of a wide variety of crimes as well as those who suffer from more complicated addiction and mental illness and who may have served prison time.

The Kelley House's opening comes as community corrections celebrates its 20th year. In 1985, the county department had a budget of about \$141,504. Last year, the department had a budget of about \$5.8 million, according to community corrections.

Grants from the Indiana Department of Correction and a one-time federal stimulus grant paid for renovations and operations of the new center.

aiacone@jg.net



Swikar Patel | The Journal Gazette

The Kelley House, a county-run residential treatment center at 2720 Culbertson St., opens today.

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