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Journal Gazette

Published: February 24, 2011 3:00 a.m.

Ankle monitor promotes accountability

Melissa Long

Home detention is not for wimps. I can say that having some knowledge of the subject.

As part of a special joint project between Indiana's NewsCenter and The Journal Gazette on Indiana's efforts to reduce its prison population, I volunteered to see what it would be like to be on home detention with a GPS monitor for a week.

I went down to Community Corrections to meet with Stan Pfleuger, the public affairs director. He handed me a ream of paper that I was to read and sign off on. My gut reaction was to put an end to this insanity, pronto.

The number of rules and regulations would make even the most experienced criminal blanch. Here is a sampling: you must have a land-line phone with no extra features such as call waiting, call forwarding or even an answering machine; you must fill out a schedule for the following week. The only approved places you can go are work, church, school or the doctor, and you have to call before you leave and call when you arrive, or they'll call you. You can forget about taking the dog for a walk, spending time on your front porch or in your garage. Your employer has to sign for you to verify that you actually work there and what your hours are. If your history involves any kind of offense against a person with whom you live, you can't live there.

To top it off, you and every member of your household must sign a consent form agreeing to submit to random searches of your home for drugs, alcohol or weapons. Random, as in 24/7.

After being questioned and psychologically tested with a sheaf of true-or-false questions such as: "I'm sometimes tempted to hit people" (true), I was photographed and I got my ankle bracelet. It was bigger than I expected but not as heavy. The technician showed me how to charge it and assured me it was fully waterproof and virtually indestructible unless I wanted to cut it off and run, in which case I would be charged as though I had broken out of jail.

I drove to work and promptly forgot to call in. They called me. My dog was wound like a top all week because I couldn't give him his daily walk. I did get permission to keep my appointment for a haircut, but I had forgotten to charge the thing so I had to drag the charger to the salon. A group of Cub Scouts was visiting the station, and I caught some of the mothers checking out the anklet and whispering. They were wondering what I'd done wrong. I explained.

My husband was amused by the whole exercise, as he is with so many of my endeavors. As long as it was off by the weekend and didn't interfere with our weekly night out, it was OK by him. If our sons were younger, the whole GPS tracking thing might have started to give him ideas.

I didn't have to submit to the random drug tests that real offenders do, and they didn't search the house. But I had to be prepared just in case. I cleared out my chardonnay supply and checked the fridge for cooking wine and the medicine cabinet for cough syrup that might contain alcohol. Got a head cold? NyQuil is off limits.

Since many offenders on GPS monitoring have a history of domestic battery or even a sex crime, corrections officers can designate what's known as an "exclusion zone." That means they can make certain areas of town off limits. If an offender enters an exclusion zone, officials are notified immediately, and the ankle bracelet actually talks to the offender, telling him or her to leave immediately and return to the correction building. If the offender doesn't leave, a police officer will find them and escort them downtown. I tested this feature by veering into my phony "exclusion zone," the Jorgensen YMCA. Sure enough, within about 30 seconds the bracelet chirped and an electronic voice ordered me to leave. I did. No sense making more of a nuisance of myself.

My experience on home detention was revealing. I can fully understand that it is not for everyone. I appreciate that some offenders find it too difficult and would rather be back in jail where they don't have to think about every move they make. But the good folks at Community Corrections are quick to point out that the easy route isn't always what's best.

From the taxpayers' standpoint, there are two main advantages: offenders pay to be on home detention; taxpayers pay for jail. Fully half the budget for Community Corrections comes from fees paid by home detention offenders. Also, counseling and classes are part of the home detention



Photo courtesy WPTA-TV

Melissa Long is fitted with her ankle monitor.

Correcting
Corrections

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experience, which helps offenders deal with some of the behavior that led to their crime. I attended part of a class dealing with why people find it so difficult to change bad habits. I am no longer cracking gum when I chew it.

If reforms to Indiana's prison system lead to more offenders on this kind of monitoring, I don't think there should be undue alarm throughout the citizenry. It's not a foolproof system, but the alternative is costly and not necessarily more effective. Offenders will eventually be released from jail. They'll be out on their own soon enough.

This method balances punishment with tools for accountability and better decision-making and in the end, that is a worthy goal.

Melissa Long is an anchor at Indiana's NewsCenter. She wrote this for The Journal Gazette.

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