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Correcting Corrections: Local Governments Leery Of Cost Crunch From Sentencing Reforms

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By Jeff Neumeyer
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FORT WAYNE, IN (Indiana's NewsCenter) --- Allen County court and government officials are leery about how sentencing modifications contemplated by the Indiana Legislature could impact local budgets.

It's part of a series of special reports we're calling "Correcting Corrections."

At least two Allen County leaders are suspicious of the state asking them to take on new responsibilities for monitoring offenders.

There's a history of unfunded mandates being passed down the line.

In this discussion, county governments have a simple message for the state: Show me the money.

Ed Buss, who until about a week ago ran Indiana's prison system, says counties that invest in treatment programs, so drug offenders can be monitored at home, will not get stuck with the whole bill.

Ed Buss/Former IDOC Commissioner: " They will get money back if they divert the "D" felons, the low risk felons, keep them in communities. We will help them pay for whatever programs they adopt."

Buss says the state also stands ready to help counties get programs off the ground, offering aid in collecting user fees from offenders being kept in work release or home detention, rather than sent off to prison.

Jeff Neumeyer: " Allen County has had community corrections for a quarter century, but the changes being considered even make the leaders of this program a little nervous."

There's really no debate that Allen County can supervise hundreds of low-risk felons at a cheaper cost than if the same offenders are locked up in prison.

But Allen County Commissioner Nelson Peters is afraid the state wants to unload the offenders and the cost of their supervision.

Nelson Peters/(R) Allen County Commissioner: " They can't continue to take from the county those scarce resources that we have, yet turn around and say, oh, we can't afford to do this at the state level, you get to take this back."

Judge Fran Gull/Allen Superior Criminal Division: " It costs a lot of money to make sure that people are doing what

they're supposed to be doing, going where they're supposed to be going."

Judge Gull actually supports the concept of diverting some lower risk felons to local monitoring programs, but she too worries, when it comes time to deliver the goods, the state will do a disappearing act.

Fran Gull: " When you're talking a wholesale inflow of additional people, we can't do it, not with the existing resources."

We've heard the stories about the democratic lawmakers who walked out of the Statehouse over Right to Work legislation.

Sentencing reform proposals appear to be a different animal.

Many democrats are okay with showing more mercy for lower risk drug offenders, and those committing small dollar thefts.

In some cases, republicans are more hesitant about supporting sentencing changes, fearing they will be labeled soft on crime.

It means there's no certainty the reforms will be passed, even with the solid republican control of the General Assembly.