

Cost of sentence bill questioned

Probation officials: Programs can't handle expected influx of offenders.

By Charles Wilson

of The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Probation programs aren't ready for an influx of offenders expected under proposed changes to Indiana's sentencing laws, officials told lawmakers Tuesday at a hearing that attracted more than 100 people.

The Senate Corrections and Sentencing Committee considered a bill that would steer lower-level felons into probation, community corrections and drug treatment instead of prison. A state-commissioned report suggested the plan could save the state more than \$1 billion over several years.

"We're not unwilling to do it. We just need the resources to do it," said Monroe County Circuit Judge Ken Todd, who was among more than a dozen people who testified.

The report, by the Pew Center on the States and the Council of State Governments Justice Center, determined that the changes could save Indiana \$1.2 billion that would otherwise go to building new prisons over the next seven years. Another \$37 million would be saved in food, medical and other costs.

The plan, which would go into effect July 1, also visualizes spending \$27 million over six years on strengthening probation, incentives for counties that send fewer lower-level felons to prison, and improving access to drug and behavioral treatment.

Some officials said they weren't sure that \$27 million would be enough to offset the costs to equip probation and community corrections agencies to handle hundreds of offenders who no longer would be sent to prison.

"There is a big concern that we do not have the resources to be ready for July 1," said Howard County chief probation officer Don Travis. "Currently, we're not ready."

The committee plans to vote Tuesday on the bill, which has the support of Gov. Mitch Daniels.