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Howard County Community Corrections Advisory Board votes to put together another plan

Devin Zimmerman Aug 10, 2016



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Friday's meeting of the Howard County Community Corrections Advisory Board was short, but the same can't be said of the executive session held before it.

Per state guidelines, the press is not allowed into executive sessions. However, it's clear from standing outside the closed-door meeting that tensions ran high. During the meeting, which was scheduled to last only half an hour but ran well over the designated limit, shouting could be heard in exchanges between the board members. Once the dust settled, the board convened in an open session that lasted only two minutes. The outcome was a single motion, that the county continue to pursue work release, and a plan for implementing the program shall be ready for presentation to the commissioners by Jan. 15.

This comes after a controversial meeting of the Howard County Council this month, where council members voted to not finance the renovations of the old county jail to house work release. In effect, this move resulted in \$1.1 million in Department of Correction's grant funding being left on the table and shut down a plan that would have seen work release up and going by January.



So now, the county is tasked with coming together by January to formulate a cohesive plan. The difficulty may not be in crafting the plan, but rather getting everyone to agree on how to go about putting the program together. As noted by many public officials, work release has been a topic of discussion for at least two decades, and the disagreements have been wide-ranging.

This problem is easily on display in a 2006 feasibility report for work release, which was carried out by a private entity to explore the possibility of getting the program up and going in the county. In the study it is noted that communication lines aren't always open, as indicated by a survey of those who would be involved in the process.

In the study it is written, "There is little evidence of open communication throughout the local criminal justice system. This will undermine future efforts as changes are implemented. There is also an obvious lack of trust among many leaders."

This problem became apparent during this month's council meeting. The council shot down renovating the old jail, proposed building a new facility that the commissioners vehemently opposed, and the idea of utilizing the Garden Inn in Kokomo was brought up again at this time as well. The Garden Inn was previously nixed as a work release location because of zoning issues.

Apparently, the Garden Inn was on the table as late as March this year, according to community corrections advisory board member Brad Bagwell. He noted that finding a home for the facility has been a topic of disagreement and difficulty for many years.

"Probably the major reason is a lack of finding a facility, finding a home for it," said Bagwell. "That's been the major reason. We haven't had a place to go. I think the judges all along have been willing to use it as a sentencing option ... Some of my notes from probably the late '90s talked about Judge (Lynn) Murray talking about work release and using it as another sentencing option."

And, it seems, settling on a location resulted in a rushed presentation to the council as well.

"We had an executive session to talk about it back in February or March," said Bagwell. "The result of that was we're going to look at the Garden Inn. Larry Murrell and I talked about any contingencies of property we would possibly purchase. That was the plan as we left that meeting. Next thing I know is there is a tour of the facility. One of the things we had was we wanted DOC to come look at the Garden Inn, and we could look at contingencies we might have to add to an offer to purchase. Next thing I know is Paul Wyman has a DOC person come up to tour the facility. And it turns out it's to tour the old jail, and Garden Inn is off the table. That's how we got back into the old jail and away from the Garden Inn. I think it was March.

"We had to modify the budget that had to be submitted to DOC based on how we would operate work release. It was originally written based upon being in the Garden Inn, then had to be modified based on being in the old jail, and then it had to be modified because it was for being in a one-year program ... There were several iterations that went down to the DOC under the understanding that the people at DOC said they would make a favorable recommendation."



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The progress made thus far indicates the consensus is that work release is needed. Judge Bill Menges noted as much.

“Everybody in this room now agrees that we need work release,” said Menges. “The question becomes how are we going to do it? There are details that need to be fleshed out. We were operating under a very, very short timeline. While I wasn’t at the council meeting it is my understanding that some of the information that was presented to them was based upon hearsay upon hearsay. While it may be accurate, it’s not \$1 million accurate. That all needs to be fleshed out. We all need to figure out what the \$1 million will cover and what it’s not going to cover. Figure out where it’s going to come from and when it’s going to come online. That will have to be done in conjunction with looking at other options that are available. One of the options that got thrown on the table by the council was building a new building with no plans. So we don’t know if we can build a new building.”

To formulate a plan going forward, a subcommittee was formed by the advisory board that will tackle the plan for work release. This subcommittee is made up of Commissioner Paul Wyman, Community Corrections Director Ray Tetrault, County Councilman Stan Ortman, Judge Lynn Murray, Judge Doug Tate, Menges, Sheriff Steve Rogers, Bagwell, and Chief Probation Officer Dustin Delong.

Included in this plan will not only be the answer to where the facility will be housed (either via constructing a new facility, purchasing another building, or renovating an older facility), but also how work release will work. According to information provided by Tetrault, work release will need to include cognitive-based treatment, an environment that is safe and likely to create a desire to continue living the same way upon release, addictions treatment, and a separation of male and female clients.

Should the county receive DOC grant funding in the future, this is how the funding will be maintained, said Tetrault. It’s how the program will truly be effective and offer an alternative sentencing option somewhere between in-home detention and jail.

“If you’re not doing any of these things you are more likely to lose your grant,” said Tetrault. “We have to get a consensus on that. Some view it as a penal place. It’s incarceration; it’s an alternative sentencing. DOC will not agree with that. DOC will say we want rehabilitation. The big thing is what kind of facility it should be. We know if we put them in a facility they don’t want to be in, that does nothing to deter criminal activity in the future. We know that if we put them in a decent place to live in and they’re treated like human beings that may be the first time they’re treated that way.”

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