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## Budget deficit could limit prison alternative program

By [Ryan Haggerty](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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A state-funded program that provides alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent offenders with drug and alcohol addictions in Milwaukee County has made progress since it began two years ago, but Wisconsin's budget deficit could hamper the program's growth, officials say.

The Treatment Alternatives and Diversion program began in March 2007 and has been funded by \$375,000 per year in state money, according to the Milwaukee County district attorney's office.

Last year, however, the program was forced to obtain nearly \$250,000 in additional funding from other sources to continue operating, according to the district attorney's office.

But with the state facing a projected \$5.9 billion hole in its two-year budget, government funding for the program is slated to remain at \$375,000 per year through 2011.

The state also funds the program in six other counties.

While acknowledging the financial difficulties facing Wisconsin, the program's supporters in Milwaukee County say it deserves increased support.

As of December 2008, 59% of the nearly 800 people who participated in the roughly six-month program had the charges against them dropped or dismissed, saving just over \$1 million in incarceration costs, according to the district attorney's office.

"I appreciate the jam that (Gov.) Jim Doyle and the Legislature are in, and I can understand why they might want to expand a program like this but just feel that they don't have the resources," said David Riemer, Doyle's former budget director who currently serves as the director of the Community Advocates Public Policy Institute in Milwaukee. "I hope that at least this level of funding that is proposed in the budget is sustained.&ensp.&ensp.&ensp.&ensp;When you have an effective program that has been shown to&ensp.&ensp.&ensp.&ensp;get people back on the track to being law-abiding, tax-paying citizens, clearly that's an investment we want to make."

The program has Doyle's backing, said Ryan Sugden, spokesman for the state Office of Justice Assistance.

"By keeping funding for that program whole, it signals the strong support that the governor has for the program, particularly in these tight financial times," Sugden said. "It's a very promising program. It will save us money in the future."

Money from the federal stimulus plan that has been set aside for criminal justice purposes can be used to help fund the county's program, Sugden said.

Under the program, specialists screen offenders as they are booked into jail, to determine if they have substance abuse problems and are eligible for social services, then recommend whether the person can be safely monitored in the community and under what conditions.

Alternatives to incarceration include community supervision, addiction treatment, drug testing, payment of restitution and community service.

The program reduces the chances that participants will re-offend and allows prosecutors to focus on violent criminals, said John Chisholm, Milwaukee County's district attorney.

Of the people who completed the program, 2% were later admitted to a state prison, according to Chisholm's office, which cited a University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute study of the program.

"If you can divert 30% to 40% of the cases, you would be saving literally tens of millions of dollars for the (criminal justice) system, and you could easily turn that back into the front end of the system and save even more money," said Chisholm, who hopes to expand the screening process to more arrestees.

"The (cases) that you do issue, everyone would essentially know that this is a serious case, and this is a person who is in all likelihood going to be convicted and see some jail time or some prison time."

Although he said he opposes Doyle's plan to give early release to some low-risk inmates at state prisons, Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker said he supports the Treatment Alternatives and Diversion program.

"It's the sort of diversion we like, which is on the front end where you can actually do it based on a true risk-assessment and have the prosecutors involved," Walker said. The program "allows the DA and his team to spend their time on the truly serious offenders who do belong in prison," Walker said.

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