

FEATURED

Funding issues eliminate road crew program

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14 hrs ago For almost 35 years, the county's road crew program has served as an alternative to jail time.

However, for financial reasons, Monroe County judges decided to discontinue the program. The last day of the program was Saturday. Eight individuals participated.

"We are disappointed that we have to cease with road crew, but we have to make tough decisions," Tom Rhodes, community corrections director and assistant chief probation officer for Monroe County, said at Tuesday's county council meeting.

The road crew program is one of four alternative sentencing programs as part of the probation department. Others include house arrest, public restitution and victim-offender reconciliation. Troy Hatfield, deputy chief probation officer, said discontinuing the road crew program is projected to save around \$50,000. Additionally, Hatfield said, the one remaining road crew officer has agreed to fill a vacant legal secretary position with the program and his current position is being eliminated.

When the program first started on Oct. 3, 1983, it was a seven-day-a-week operation with up to 30 participants. The seven days scaled back to five days a week in 2007. The program employed one road crew officer, who transported and supervised a maximum of 14 participants.

Between 2014 and 2017, just over 2,000 individuals participated in the program for a combined total of 28,700 hours of labor. Chief Probation Officer Linda Brady said referrals to the program are about half what they were 25 years ago.

Offenders sent to the road crew program pick up trash along county and state roads. Some also worked with government organizations and nonprofit groups such as the Monroe County Solid Waste Manage District, Hillel Center at Indiana University, Bloomington Housing Authority, Bloomington Parks and Recreation Department, Middle Way House's The Rise, according to a probation department memo.

Now, the road crew program will only be offered on an as needed basis such as following Little 500 festivities.

Those who commit certain offenses during the popular party Little 500 weekend in the spring can have their charges dismissed if they meet certain requirements, including paying hundreds of dollars. They spend three hours picking up trash along with paying a \$428 fee and taking drug education class. Those who qualify are mostly individuals charged with public intoxication and underage drinking.

Brady said unlike other road crews, the offenders are instructed to report to the stadium for service rather than being transported saving on costs.

An Indiana Department of Corrections grant initially funded the road crew program. It also funded the public restitution, house arrest and victim-offender reconciliation programs. DOC funding eventually ended in 2007 for the road crew, public restitution and victim-offender reconciliation programs. Since then, the county has covered program expenses with court user fees. These include fees for home detention, electronic monitoring, drug testing, day reporting and community service.

Hatfield said it has reached a point now that difficult decisions have to be made to reduce expenses coming out the user fee fund.

“Although the average monthly user fee revenues have declined slightly, the average monthly expenses has increased substantially,” Brady said.

In the past few years, Brady said the Monroe County Community Corrections has shifted to serving more individuals charged with or convicted of felony offenses. Brady said the use of active global positions satellite (GPS) electronic monitoring also increased an average of 50 percent each year since 2015 as it is requirement for offenders to have them when on house arrest.

“Maintaining the current capacity for electronic monitoring provides the courts with options for pretrial release in lieu of jail and/or monetary bail,” Brady said. “However, this level of community supervision also comes with increased costs from the monitoring company.”

Brady said offenders that likely would have done the road crew program would now be sent to public restitution, where offenders perform community service work for local not-for profit and government agencies.