

Millions Collected From Parolees – But Where Does It Go?

By Joy Robertson
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There are nearly 70,000 Missourians on probation and parole - and every month, most are required to send money to the state. It goes to a fund that provides 'community corrections and intervention services for offenders.'

But some people who pay it, and people who provide the services, are wondering where that money goes?

KOLR10's Joy Robertson investigates.

After four DWIs and five years in the Missouri Department of Corrections (DOC) system, Darrell Williams got the help he needed. Now as a licensed professional counselor he helps others beat their addictions. "By the grace of God they sent me to a treatment center for 120 days, and the Department of Corrections literally saved my life, because I was given treatment," Williams says.

But things have changed since Williams was in the system. In April, 2006 the Department of Corrections has required people on probation and parole to pay 30-dollars a month to the Missouri Intervention Fee Program. It's supposed to help pay for things like substance abuse and mental health treatment. But where does the money go?

"I've asked three probation officers and none of them could tell me where it's going," says Sand Tapp, on a five year probation for forgery and drug charges. He wonders what he's getting for his money. "I don't see any benefit from it. I'm required to go to treatment, then I have to pay for all of it either out of my pocket or with insurance." An online search didn't find any public record or accounting of the Intervention Fee. A phone call and several emails to the department resulted in a few cryptic answers, but no detailed account of where the money is kept, how much has been paid in and where it's paid out. KOLR10 News cited the Missouri Sunshine Law and sent a written request to the DOC, asking for details. About two weeks later we got a 15 page report, and had to pay the department \$248 for the information.

An independent accountant crunched the numbers for us, and as of mid-October, 2006 the fund had brought in over \$24 million. Since the DOC's records indicate it only spent \$6.6 million, that leaves a \$17.5 million dollar surplus. "We do have a plan to spend that money," says Missouri Department of Corrections Director Larry Crawford.

He's asking lawmakers to appropriate \$10.5 million for a new computer system for the department, and \$2.5 million for notebook computers for probation and parole officers. "So what we're looking at is becoming more efficient and more effective. We're still actually decades behind in technology," Crawford adds.

"If you're going to take money from me that's fine but I think you have an obligation even if I am a convicted felon, to tell me what that money's going for," Williams says, questioning whether money for intervention services should be used to buy computer equipment.

According to the records provided by the DOC, much of the fee goes to residential facilities in St. Louis and Kansas City. A Kansas City entity does have an out-patient clinic in Springfield. Some money also goes to electronic monitoring and things like vehicle maintenance, food for staff meetings and state employee salaries. But ten percent doesn't even stay in Missouri.

The DOC pays a Chicago, Illinois company - Fieldware LLC - ten percent to collect the Intervention Fee. In all, people on probation and parole in Missouri have paid the Illinois company about \$2.7 million. When asked whether a Missouri company could do the work, Crawford replied that his agency did look into the possibility. "We looked at whether we could do it in-house with our own employees, and we could have but we thought it would take us longer to get the process created."

Besides being a financial burden for some offenders, the Intervention Fee is a condition of probation and parole. Darrell Williams says he knows of three cases where a trip back to prison was linked to failure to pay the fee. But Crawford says it would make no sense to send someone back to prison, since housing a prisoner costs the state more money.

"There is not now, nor has there ever been any plan to put people back in prison because they didn't pay their Intervention Fee." Williams, and two other providers KOLR-10 spoke with say they've never seen a bid opportunity from the Department of Corrections for any services in southwest Missouri. They say Medicaid often winds up paying. "We bill Medicaid for their substance abuse treatment when there's this fund sitting over here," Williams says. "I hadn't heard of it until a couple of days ago, that's true," says Mary Turner of the Carol Jones Recovery Center. "You are going to see success with clients that are seeking substance abuse treatment will be more successful if they can get in from the time they make that initial contact.

Currently right now we have 73 women who are waiting to get these services here at Carol Jones." Sand Tapp says he just wants some answers, and is tired of being fearful of asking them. "I'm a taxpayer as well as a felon, if you want to label me in this regard, but I don't know where my own money's going that I'm having to give out and it's going to the state of Missouri."