

Sarasota approves detox program

By [Mike Saewitz](#)

SARASOTA COUNTY -- The county embarked on a new plan Wednesday to get more people with drug and alcohol problems into treatment, but the plan is so innovative that even its architects are not sure whether it will work.

The county commissioners voted unanimously Wednesday to put \$2 million into the program, which will usher hundreds of addicts each year from police custody into a new, secure detoxification center. Some of the money will be used to expand a residential treatment program.

The goal is a less costly and more effective alternative to jail, where offenders cost taxpayers \$58 a day.

"If you did put dollar figures to this ... I'm betting it would make business sense, as well as social sense," said Commissioner Jon Thaxton after listening to details of the plan.

The way things happen now, the county's repeat offenders always end up at the jail -- even when they're not under arrest.

Nine of 10 substance abusers taken into custody under the Florida Marchman Act are carted off to the jail, only to sit in a cell until their blood alcohol levels go down. The act is supposed to allow police to take people who are intoxicated off the streets and get them help.

Last year, more than 600 people were booked into jail because there were no beds available at the First Step of Sarasota detoxification unit on 18th Street.

Now that the plan has been approved, more than \$500,000 will go toward converting the unit to a secure adult addictions receiving facility. There, addicts will be assessed and treated over a period of five to 10 days, instead of going to jail.

Most addicts who need more treatment will then go to other programs, including a greatly expanded 10-week residential program at the Salvation Army. It will cost nearly \$900,000 in county and nonprofit funds to run the program, which will triple in size from 15 to 45 beds. There is currently a waiting list to get into the program.

"This will help break the cycle for recidivism," David J. Beesley, the president/CEO of First Step of Sarasota, told commissioners Wednesday. "The goal is to place everyone somewhere. That is key. There are people who fall through the existing safety nets."

Officials say the expansions could be finished within the next six months. They say federal and Salvation Army money is already set aside for the final and most important part of the plan: establishing \$2 million in transitional housing for those in recovery.

SARASOTA HERALD-TRIBUNE
THURSDAY, JUNE 30, 2005

"This is one of the most comprehensive, coordinated efforts to attack a single problem that I've ever seen," Chief Judge Robert B. Bennett told commissioners Wednesday.

Other social service leaders also applauded the program as unique and innovative. They said Sarasota is the only county in the state to try anything like it.

The only commissioner to raise a question about the program was Nora Patterson, who wondered what would happen to people once they get out of rehab.

"The success of the whole program depends on what happens after that," she said. "I see a lot of unknowns. It's not real clear in my mind how we're going to measure that."

At a meeting last week, Judge Bennett himself acknowledged the difficulty of figuring out whether the program works.

"The common question I get is, 'Will this break the cycle?'" he said. "The honest answer is, 'I have no idea.'"

The commissioners approved spending \$50,000 to pay for an independent evaluation of the program by the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute at the University of South Florida.

Counting their time in front of the commission as a huge success, criminal justice and social service leaders shook hands and chatted outside the commission chambers.

Bennett said he's still not sure if the program will cure the revolving door, but he hopes for a "greater level of sustained success."

"The proof will be in the pudding, but I think there's something good going on," he said.

The plan

Phase 1 -- Substance abusers taken into police custody under the noncriminal Florida Marchman Act would be taken to a new, secure, adult addictions receiving facility. There they would be evaluated and referred to other treatment programs.

Phase 2 -- Treatment programs include the Salvation Army's VIP program, which is a voluntary 10-week residential treatment program. There, agencies including Coastal Behavioral Healthcare, Jewish Family and Children's Services and Jobs, Etc., will also provide them with psychiatric evaluations, medication management, family therapy and job training.

Phase 3 -- Officials want to provide transitional housing for people once they leave treatment programs. They say \$2 million in federal and Salvation Army money is already set aside for the final and most important part of the plan. Details were not presented to the County Commission on Wednesday.