

Volunteer group tells of jail alternatives

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BLUE HILL - It costs \$92 a day to house an inmate at Hancock County Jail, or about \$34,000 a year.

The Volunteers for Hancock Jail Residents think that money could be better spent by treating incarcerated criminals rather than by simply dumping them in prison.

"We're tired of all the negative news associated with incarceration," Judy Garvey, the volunteer group's coordinator, told a group of about 35 people Monday night at a public forum in Blue Hill. "There is an antidote to cynicism and negativity, and it starts by accepting [inmates] as human beings."

Garvey led a panel of area volunteers who spoke about the aspects of treating Hancock County's incarcerated. That panel included David Kessner, who is working to organize a post-release planning program for inmates in Hancock County.

"There is less interest in rehabilitation now; a hardening of attitudes about how to treat those that are incarcerated," he said.

Kessner, who used the \$92 a day statistic to remind the audience that keeping inmates locked up is "a huge economic issue and burden on taxpaying citizens."

He pointed out that there are 1.4 million incarcerated criminals in the United States today, up from about 300,000 in the early 1980s, and for every three inmates released in the coming year, two will be arrested again within a year.

"We need to do a better job working with the inmates while they're still inside," he said.

The panel included Dick Dimond, who coordinates a regional deferred sentencing project, which is similar to the state's drug court program.

"There is a tremendous overlap between addiction and incarceration," Dimond said. "The problems are certainly not new, but they have escalated."

Fourteen Hancock County residents now are enrolled in the deferred sentencing project, including James O'Rourke, 51, who avoided a jail sentence for cocaine trafficking by entering the program.

O'Rourke attended Monday's forum and spoke emotionally about what it has done for him.

"The typical case looks like me," he said before explaining the story of how he was caught last November by Maine Drug Enforcement Agency officials. He was carrying 48 grams of cocaine in his car. "And I can tell you this program works; sometimes all you need is a break."

The deferred sentencing project is one of many volunteer programs discussed at Monday's forum.

Garvey said the point of the forum was to address ways volunteers can help rehabilitate inmates so that they can re-enter the community with a low risk that they will reoffend.

"Sometimes just the opportunity to see an outside visitor makes all the difference," she said.

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