



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

EDITORIAL: Mental health court needs county funding

Published: Friday, August 10, 2012 at 3:30 a.m.

An experimental mental health court established through the collaborative efforts of the Tuscaloosa County court system, the sheriff's office and Indian Rivers Mental Health Center appears to be working.

The intent of the mental health court, which was set up as a four-month pilot program, is to provide care and treatment for people with mental illnesses who face minor criminal charges while also reducing the inmate population at the county jail and the cost to the county of providing mental health care.

Two months into the experiment, six of the 51 inmates evaluated so far have been diverted to the program. Sheriff Ted Sexton expects about 30 inmates to be in the program by the end of September, when the pilot phase concludes. That's 30 fewer inmates in the jail, which is chronically overcrowded, and an opportunity to provide better care for 30 people who might otherwise continue on a path of crime.

Here's the downside: When the pilot program was proposed in May, the Tuscaloosa County Commission voted down a request for \$10,000 to pay for a case worker and a therapist needed to identify the inmates who would qualify for diversion.

That cost would increase, of course, if the mental health court were permanently established, but we suspect, though we haven't run the numbers, that the cost of doing nothing would be even higher — with proper care, people in the program might even have a chance to contribute to society, rather than being a burden to it.

Unfortunately, the commission opted not to participate in the pilot program. Instead, Sexton came up with the money in his department's discretionary fund, but that's not a reasonable source of funding for a permanent mental health court. We hope the commission will reconsider in two months when the pilot phase ends and a decision has to be made on whether the mental health court will continue. The mental health court makes sense; the commission should get behind it.

Copyright © 2012 TuscaloosaNews.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.