

NEWSRELEASE

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Corrections gets grant to address Native American recidivism

The U.S. Department of Justice has approved a \$925,000 grant to the Montana Department of Corrections for hiring and training eight specialized probation and parole officers to focus on reducing recidivism among Native American offenders and those offenders plagued by both mental health problems and addictions.

Most of the additional officers will be assigned to Montana's more rural areas, particularly those near several of the state's Indian reservations.

The grant, using federal economic stimulus funds, will pay for five officers stationed in reservation-area communities of Cut Bank, Glasgow, Hardin, Havre and Polson. They will develop programs and strategies attuned to the needs of American Indian offenders who have a recidivism rate that is 33 percent higher than non-Indian offenders.

Three new officers will be located in Butte, Hamilton and Livingston to deal with the large population of offenders whose problems with mental illness and chemical dependency make it difficult for them to succeed in the community. An estimated 42 percent of offenders supervised by the department have such co-occurring disorders.

The project will require the officers to develop best practices to deal with these challenging offender populations, coordinate a broad array of community-based services, and strengthen relationships with local and tribal partners.

"Not only is it more difficult to manage caseload in rural areas due to the vast distances we face and the social-economic conditions facing residents, but it also takes substantial time and dedication to address cultural and medical issues that may contribute to recidivism," said Ron Alsbury, chief of the department's Probation and Parole Bureau. "This grant will allow us to provide more personalized attention to those with the highest risk of committing future crimes.

"The result will be a safer Montana and more effective supervision of important offender populations," he added. "The grant is far-reaching. We'll target drug addictions, mental health problems and the unique cultural challenges of Native American offenders. This truly does touch all of Indian country in Montana."

The data made it clear that these two groups of offenders represented a need that must be addressed in innovative ways in order to make a difference, Alsbury said. "This is an example of proactively seeking solutions to tough problems."

(more)

Myrna Kuka, the DOC's American Indian liaison and a member of the Blackfeet Tribe, sees the grant-funded project as having potential beyond helping offenders.

"There is great opportunity to increase collaboration between DOC and its tribal partners," she said. "Many offenders return to the system due to technical violations that are preventable. Without a doubt, cultural misunderstandings contribute to this, and DOC is working to address the hurdles some offenders may face. We're all on the same team to help offenders succeed while making Montana communities stronger and safer."

Corrections Director Mike Ferriter said the grant is an acknowledgement by the Justice Department that an important issue in Montana needs an innovative response.

"The funding allows us yet another opportunity to achieve the DOC's goal of reducing recidivism by providing additional support and services to offenders," he said.

Each officer will receive specialized training on how to most effectively manage their caseloads, including how to intervene when offenders are not compliant with their release plans. Emphasis will be placed on treatment programs that address root causes rather than prison.

Corrections officials will measure the project's success by tracking recidivism rates, as well as the number of offender evaluations, community referrals, disciplinary actions and community partnerships.

The grant application was supported by the Crow Tribe, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Montana Board of Crime Control, district judges and law enforcement. The grant, which will cover all costs of the project for two years, is funded by the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act under the Assistance to Rural Law Enforcement to Combat Crime and Drugs Program.

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