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New technology helps with tracking offenders

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Technology introduced in Yellowstone County this year is making it easier to keep close tabs on the men and women under community-based supervision.

With the aid of electronic devices, supervisors at Alternatives Inc. in Billings are now able to monitor the travels of the people they supervise or receive hourly updates on whether drunk-driving offenders are using alcohol in defiance of bond requirements or sentencing guidelines.

The monitors - which are used in separate programs - have shown promising results so far.

"It makes our job a lot easier to track the people the courts want us to track closely," said C. Lamar Clark, the lead misdemeanor probation officer at Alternatives Inc.

Alternatives is under contract with the city of Billings and Yellowstone County to provide residential and nonresidential treatment and supervision programs, including misdemeanor probation and pretrial supervision. It also provides services for state and federal inmates and parolees.

In January, the nonprofit company became the first of three corrections-based companies in Billings to acquire Secure Continuous Remote Alcohol Monitors, or SCRAMs.

The 8-oz. devices are secured to an ankle bracelet and test a person's sweat every hour on a 24-hour basis. They also test for alcohol emissions and take additional tests to check for tampering.

When alcohol is detected, the bracelet sends a radio signal to a modem in the subject's home, which in turn transmits to a Web-based program monitored by Alcohol Monitoring Systems Inc. of Denver. Case managers monitor the Web site to ensure participants are complying.

The company has 20 ankle bracelets in operation at any time, said Yvonne Keller, community alternatives supervisor. Many of those are repeat DUI offenders who are forced to wear the devices for 60 to 90 days after leaving alcohol-treatment programs required by the Department of Corrections.

Occasionally, local judges order their use for certain DUI convictions.

The Department of Corrections and courts, not Alternatives Inc., decide who wears the

devices.

"We look at it as a tool to help people maintain their sobriety," said Bryce Macomber, a misdemeanor probation officer who said the monitors have improved success rates in the program.

A second system - also new to Yellowstone County - was introduced in August.

The BI ExacuTrack combines a Global Positioning System with a radio transmitter to enhance tracking capabilities. The transmitter is worn on an ankle bracelet throughout the day, as with traditional monitoring devices. Offenders clip the GPS unit to a waistband or purse while leaving home.

That allows for tracking an offender while he or she goes about pre-approved business. The device will determine if someone has gone near a location prohibited as part of sentencing or treatment - an alleged victim's house, a tavern or school grounds, for example.

"We know they entered into an area they're not supposed to enter into, what time they entered and how long they were there," Clark said.

The radio transmitter will transmit an alarm if it is moved too far from the GPS unit.

The GPS information does not transmit automatically, however. Participants must load the monitor into a receiver in their home upon returning from a trip. The data is then transmitted via a phone line to the company that operates the device, Behavioral Interventions Inc., of Boulder, Colo.

Furthermore, if a violation should occur outside business hours, as in a recent alleged violation involving a suspended middle school guidance counselor, supervisors at Alternatives Inc. would not learn about it until office hours resumed the next morning.

"That basically boils down to manpower and money and we don't have either to have somebody sitting at a computer 24/7," Macomber said.

He said the system is nevertheless an improvement over other electronic monitoring devices, allowing case managers daily confirmation that participants are sticking with the program. It may also work in the favor of the offenders and suspects by protecting them from potentially false allegations waged by disgruntled partners as part of ongoing squabbles.

"It's not just to protect the victim, it's to protect the person that's been accused," Clark said.

Only three ExacuTrack units were in operation earlier this month, and officials from Alternatives Inc. said they were exploring another program that would provide active tracking.

The units are costly - at \$2,000 per BI ExacuTrack and \$1,700 per SCRAM unit - and both programs require offenders to finance administrative costs. For the SCRAM unit, there is an installation fee as well as a \$12 a day fee. The GPS unit involves installation expenses and a \$15 a day fee.

The monitors also trigger alarms if they are tampered with. Offenders are warned they may face felony charges as well as replacement costs if they damage the units.

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