



Deadline nears for county to add probation office space

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Time is running out for Cheyenne County to find additional space for probation offices before it loses grant money for that purpose.

Chief probation officer for district 12, Linda Buehler visited with the Cheyenne County commissioners several times within the past year, each time asking for more space for the Cheyenne County office. She spoke with them again on Monday and stressed that time was running short.

"We're kind of running up against a timeline now for the grant monies that we've gotten for 2013," Buehler said.

District 12, which is based in Scotts Bluff county, handles juvenile and adult probation cases for the entire Nebraska panhandle as well as Grant County. The district's Cheyenne County office is currently housed in the courthouse.

As responsibility for underage offenders transitioned out of youth rehabilitation and treatment centers and is transferred from the Department of Health and Human Services to the Office of Probation Administration,

the burden of finding and paying for more office space for probation is placed on counties.

The bill responsible for this change, LB 561, was passed by the Nebraska Legislature in May of last year. This bill and the associated legislation bring extensive reform to the juvenile justice system in an effort to expand services and allow alternatives to detention for youth in Nebraska, according to the Nebraska State Bar Association.

Although the state awarded grants to counties for the last two years to help with this transition, it will not award any more grant money for space after 2014.

The almost \$13,000 in grant money awarded to the county for additional probation space in 2013 must be spent by the end of June, or the county loses those funds. The county was awarded almost \$30,000 for 2014. Of that around \$16,000 will be allocated for office space and the rest would go to various youth causes and groups including Cool Kids Club and Kids Plus.

During past conversations regarding this issue, the commissioners expressed frustration that the state passed initiatives like these,

but landed the county with the bill. The commissioners don't believe the grant money is sufficient to pay rent for office space or to buy space to house probation.

Phil Patten, a probation officer in Cheyenne County told the commissioners about the chaotic conditions in his office.

"It's amazing that we get anything done," Patten said.

The current situation, with two full time probation officers, one part time officer, a data analyst and a clerical worker in a space with only three offices does not afford clientele much privacy.

In addition to this, when officers in Scotts Bluff County do pre-sentencing investigations by video with Cheyenne County clients to help with the local workload, they must use one of those offices for this purpose.

"When that happens, we have to give up our office space and that can take anywhere from an hour and a half to three hours for that interview to get done," Patten said.

An office near the courthouse would be the best option, Buehler told the commissioners, so probationers can make it there easily.

"Sometimes they're just

trying to figure out how to get gas in their car," Buehler said. "They're just trying to meet life's most basic needs to get things done that are ordered by the court and to get the help that they need. So to set us clear out on the edge of town would not be conducive to a positive experience for them or helpful to them."

She also reminded them that if the office of probation was split between two locations, this would mean buying more equipment for the second office.

Buehler asked the commissioners to find a space with three additional offices if possible, in case she is given permission to make a new hire in Sidney in the future.

Commissioner Ken McMillen suggested a few office spaces fairly close to the courthouse that might work for the office of probation's needs.

"I guess the only one thing to do is to address it and get with it," he said.

McMillen promised to attempt to find some office space options before the next commissioner meeting on May 19.