

Criminal justice council created

By Lydia Statz, Union staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, June 11, 2014 10:58 am

JEFFERSON — The county criminal justice system will become a little more collaborative in the coming months, after the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors voted Tuesday to create a criminal justice council.

The Jefferson County Criminal Justice Collaborating Council, which will consist of at least 13 voting members, is an offshoot of the county's new alcohol treatment court program, which is set to begin work this month.

The treatment court program was funded through a state grant in February, as part of the state's Treatment Alternatives and Diversion Program. The \$112,000 grant was used to establish the treatment court, which will guide drunken-driving violators toward treatment in an attempt to reduce the number of repeat offenders.

County Administrator Ben Wehmeier told supervisors during their monthly meeting Tuesday that as county officials were investigating the alcohol court process, they concluded that continuing to meet on a regular basis would allow the county to enhance public safety through continuing collaboration. The council's members will evaluate not only the ongoing effectiveness of alcohol treatment court, but also look at a number of other issues occurring in the county, such as supporting the rights and needs of victims and providing adequate rehabilitation programs.

The council will consist of Chief Circuit Court Judge Randy Koschnick, County Administrator Wehmeier, County Board Chairperson Jim Schroeder, Sheriff Paul Milbrath, District Attorney Susan Happ, the local State Public Defender and others, including a citizen representative.

Though not formally a part of the new alcohol treatment court program, the council is an outgrowth of that initiative, which targets repeat non-violent drunken-driving offenders who are charged with their third- through sixth offenses. The program offers intensive treatment options prior to their conviction in hope of changing their recurring behavior.

Though many of the program's details still are to be finalized, offenders who choose to participate will work with case managers, be intensively monitored by the county's judges, be subjected to random alcohol testing and attend individualized treatment sessions as they work through the program's phases.

Successful offenders will "graduate" from the program and will serve less time in jail than those who have not done so. Even so, District Attorney Happ has said that offenders still will be convicted of OWIs, and that the county's emphasis is on preserving the public safety.

Happ also said that her office will retain discretion over who will be admitted into the program, and will scrutinize each offender to ensure he or she is a suitable candidate.

The program's stated goal is to graduate 66 percent of all who enter the treatment court, and to measurably reduce the number of citizens being arrested for a fourth or greater drunken-driving offense.

Similar alcohol-treatment courts have gained popularity around the state in recent years as law enforcement

officials search for ways to lower the state's drunken-driving rate. Jefferson, Dodge and Walworth counties were among 13 counties receiving grants. Waushara, Columbia and Lac du Flambeau counties also received funds to set up drug-treatment courts.

The \$112,714 of state funding received will be augmented by \$38,255 in county funds to set the program's first-year budget at \$150,969. The grant money will help pay for 1.5 full-time-equivalent case managers, drug-testing supplies for the program participants and other program expenses.

A total of 109 third-offense or greater OWI convictions occurred in Jefferson County in 2012. Once the program is established, about 40 of these offenders will be eligible to participate in the alcohol treatment court each year.

Also on Tuesday, Supervisor Kirk Lund brought forth an initiative to place an advisory referendum question on the county's November ballot asking about the expansion of state healthcare coverage. The referendum question would read: "Shall the State Legislature accept available federal funds for BadgerCare to ensure that thousands of Wisconsin citizens have access to quality and affordable health coverage?"

Upon the passage of the Affordable Care Act, each state in the county was given the option to accept federal dollars to expand the state's Medicaid program. Gov. Scott Walker rejected the federal money, opting instead to reform the state's BadgerCare program, shifting some with slightly higher incomes to the federal marketplace for coverage.

According to Lund's resolution, 19 counties have passed resolutions urging the state to utilize the available federal funds, which would help an estimated 1,052 parents and childless adults in Jefferson County gain access to BadgerCare.

Per the board rules, Lund's proposal will be forwarded to the county's Administration and Rules Committee and Human Services Board for a recommendation before coming back before the full board at a future meeting.

Also Tuesday, two citizens spoke during the public comment portion of the meeting. Cindy Arbiture of Sullivan, the newly elected president of the Jefferson County Historic Sites Preservation Commission, introduced herself to board members. Buck Smith of Johnson Creek said he was there to "continue my rant from last time," speaking on what he called the state's poor job-creation performance under Gov. Scott Walker.

Other business

In other business, the board:

- Amended the county's animal waste storage and nutrient management ordinances to bring them in line with current state and federal rules, as well as up to date with current zoning ordinances. It was the first time they had been amended since 2004.
- Transferred a one-quarter acre parcel on the shores of Lake Ripley to the Lake Ripley Management District.

The parcel was acquired by the county using Community Development Block Grant-Emergency Assistance Program funds, and is restricted as a flood management zone.

Therefore, all built structures on the property have been demolished, and the parcel is required to be kept as greenspace.

The Lake Ripley Management District is aware of those restrictions and expressed an interested in owning the parcel, supervisors were told.