

Transports will lighten police load

Sheriff's department will begin driving inmates from the prison to Central Court for hearings.

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WILKES-BARRE – What started out as a suggestion is being seen as a cost-saving procedure for municipalities that also will make Central Court proceedings safer.

Beginning Sept. 1, the Luzerne County Sheriff's Department will transport inmates from the county prison to their preliminary hearings at Central Court on East Union Street.

The move will relieve police officers of the responsibility of picking up and returning inmates to the prison, a process that has been followed for years.

"It will be a great burden off our shoulder," Swoyersville Police Chief Thomas DiMaria said.

DiMaria, as president of the Luzerne County Police Chief's Association, made the suggestion earlier this year in a meeting with Central Court Administrator Jim Torbik and county President Judge Mark A. Ciavarella Jr.

"The police chief's association explained our dilemma that it takes time for officers to pick up the inmates, watch them at Central Court and return them to the prison at the end of the hearing," DiMaria said. "This will now speed up the process of getting the officer back on the street."

Depending on each department's policy, it was a burden for many small departments to sacrifice the required number of officers to transport an inmate to Central Court, DiMaria said.

DiMaria said his department's policy requires two officers to transport an inmate.

In addition, many departments have collective bargaining agreements that require an officer be paid a certain number of overtime hours, even if it took an officer an hour to pick up the accused, attend the preliminary hearing and return the inmate to prison, DiMaria said.

Torbik said there were 258 prisoner transports to Central Court in 2006, and 467 prisoner transports in 2007.

Most preliminary hearings involving inmates are held by video in a recently remodeled courtroom at Central Court that was expanded by approximately 100 square feet.

County Sheriff Michael Savokinas said his department can easily transport inmates to Central Court because of changes made at the main courthouse on River Street, near the prison on Water Street.

Savokinas said he purchased a 25-passenger bus that will transport inmates to the main courthouse, where they will be kept in a secured cell that was recently installed. The vehicle that had been used to transport inmates to the main courthouse will be used to transport inmates to Central Court, Savokinas said.

"We'll have a dedicated van to Central Court," Savokinas said. "The inmates will be placed in a secured holding room where they'll be watched by my deputies, and when it's time for their hearing, the officer will come back and take them before a judge. When the hearing ends, the officer will return the inmate to the secured holding room and they can return to service, saving them time from returning the inmate to the prison."

Savokinas said his department transports approximately 500 inmates to the main courthouse every month.

"The 500 or so transports to Central Court a year may seem to be a large number, but in reality, it's not. I don't anticipate any problems."