

## **Small police forces get lift in transporting prisoners**

BY KELLY MONITZ

STAFF WRITER

Published August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

Police officers from small departments throughout the area will be spending more time on the streets and less time transporting prisoners to and from the Luzerne County Correctional Facility in Wilkes-Barre starting Sept. 1.

Luzerne County Sheriff Michael Savokinas volunteered his deputies to transport prisoners from the county lockup to Luzerne County Central Court, also in Wilkes-Barre, for preliminary hearings.

The sheriff estimated the additional cost for his department at about \$5,000, which is significantly less than what police departments countywide shell out annually.

"It's going to be a savings to the taxpayers as a whole," Savokinas said.

Prisoners will be transported to a secure room in Central Court in the morning and the arresting officers will escort them to the court room when their hearing is called.

Hazleton Police Chief Robert Ferdinand was pleased with Savokinas' letter officially announcing the change.

Ferdinand and other local chiefs, representing the Luzerne County Chief of Police Association, recently met with the sheriffs to discuss the feasibility of the department taking over transport responsibilities to alleviate some of the strain on police departments throughout the county, he said.

"I personally found Sheriff Savokinas and his staff to be extremely receptive in providing such assistance," Ferdinand said. "They acted immediately and went from concept to reality in an extraordinarily short time."

The chief also commended the county court and commissioners for supporting this change, which cuts down on overtime expenses and keeps officers on the street, he said.

"It will have a very positive impact in the way of public safety for every citizen in Luzerne County," Ferdinand said.

Sugarloaf Township Police Chief John Hudson won't turn down the assistance.

"It'll save us a lot of time," he said. "It's just a convenience more than anything else. It will save me manpower."

Butler Township Police Chief Charles Altmiller agreed.

"It'll alleviate a lot of the time that our officers spend transporting prisoners," he said, adding that he appreciates the sheriff's offer to help smaller departments.

Altmiller, however, hopes that not all prisoners will be transported to Central Court. Some hearings are held via video conference with closed-circuit televisions; the inmate never leaves the prison. It depends on in which courtroom the hearing is held.

"I like these (video conference) hearings the best," he said, adding that they go relatively quickly.

For Freeland police, the move frees up an additional officer, Sgt. Rob Maholik said. Prisoner transports require two officers, according to department policy, which means a second officer, who may not be involved in the case, must also spend several hours in court.

"I think it's a fantastic thing that (Savokinas is) doing," Maholik said.

Prior to central court, officers would transport a prisoner from the prison to a local magistrate's office for a preliminary hearing, which could be completed often in less than a half-hour, he said. And travel time and prisoner pickup and drop-off at the prison added another hour and half to the process, he said.

Time spent getting to and from a hearing at central court could be anywhere from two and one-half hours to four hours, Maholik said. On the other hand, central court has allowed officers to resolve smaller cases in one day without need for them to return to county court later in the process, he said.

"Central court has placed an extra financial burden on us," he said. "This is absolutely going to help."

Staff writer Bob Kalinowski contributed to this story.