

Funding approved for inmate project

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DADE CITY - It might cost less, but officials don't expect to save any money. They just called it 'the right thing to do.' The County Commission agreed Tuesday to spend \$250,000 on a pilot program to take mentally ill offenders out of the Land O'Lakes jail and put them into treatment programs.

Public Defender Bob Dillinger has overseen a similar program in Pinellas County, where 471 inmates were diverted to treatment from July 2004 to June 2005. He said Pinellas jail costs run \$79 per inmate per day, even more for mentally ill inmates requiring medication and extra supervision, while treatment facilities often cost half that amount.

Dillinger asked commissioners for \$500,000 to spread the program to Pasco County. While he argued treatment is cheaper than incarceration, Dillinger acknowledged the county wouldn't see a \$500,000 drop in its jail costs, as offenders will continue to pour into the Land O'Lakes facility.

So commissioners opted for a \$250,000 trial run instead. 'Don't keep making the savings argument,' Commissioner Steve Simon told the **public defender** at the meeting at the historic courthouse in Dade City. 'It's a bad argument. 'Make this argument: It's the right thing to do.' Under the program, inmates would be screened shortly after arriving at the jail for serious illnesses, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Those who qualify would be moved to treatment facilities in Pinellas or Pasco counties.

Dillinger said most of the mentally ill offenders are arrested for misdemeanors, such as disorderly conduct, trespassing, shoplifting and domestic disputes.

For those who seek treatment, the charges are sometimes reduced to lesser crimes, or the judge opts for probation instead of jail time, Dillinger said.

In addition to seeking county funding, Dillinger applied for a \$750,000 federal grant for the program in Pasco County but has not yet heard whether the dollars will come through. Even with commissioners giving less than he hoped, Dillinger said the program could still help 'hundreds' of inmates who need treatment. 'This is allowing us to confront a problem before it becomes totally overwhelming,' Dillinger said.