

MERIT AWARD

County honored for jail alternatives program

After AB 109, home confinement helps keep jail levels low

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SANTA CRUZ — A county program that shifts local inmates to home confinement is being honored as one of the most innovative programs in California by a statewide organization that advocates for counties.

Run through the Santa Cruz County Sheriff-Coroner's Office, the Custody Alternatives Program

is one way local officials are dealing with a controversial prisoner shift under a 2011 state bill, known as AB 109. With some counties scrambling to add jail beds, the program is helping Santa Cruz avoid that route.

"The CAP program was implemented to address the redistribution of offenders in state prison to their local jurisdiction while still maintaining high standards of public safety," Sheriff Phil Wowak

said. "We are very pleased to be honored."

The Merit Award was announced last week by the California State Association of Counties, and is one step below their top Challenge Award, which Santa Cruz County won for a separate program in 2011.

It is also one of several AB 109-related programs to have received awards. Tehama County, for example, built an auto body

shop to train inmates to service county vehicles there.

"(The program) has resulted in the safe management of the jail population," said county Probation Chief Scott MacDonald. "Consequently there is room in our jail for dangerous and high-risk offenders. This is both good public safety and good stewardship over the public dollar."

With the County Jail near capacity, the county has been looking for ways and places for defendants to serve sentences

other than behind bars. Under AB 109, all counties have seen an influx of inmates serving sentences in local jails, but the responses to that problem have varied widely.

While many counties are looking to add jail beds — Monterey County just secured \$44 million in state funds toward a new jail, for example — Santa Cruz County is not, even hoping to convert a minimum-security facility at Rountree

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Detention Center into a training center.

Since AB 109 was implemented two years ago, 370 inmates have been diverted to the CAP program, which includes home confinement and electronic monitoring. Inmates typically must serve at least a third of their jail sentence before they are considered for inclusion.

It has an impressive record so far. Just three people have sliced off their ankle bracelets — all three were recaptured — and only two have reoffended after exiting the program, according to Deputy Chief Jeremy Verinsky.

In response to AB 109, the county also has

deployed a variety of novel criminal justice approaches, and it has been asked to make presentations about its approach around the state.

The award may help further that effort. David Liebler, California State Association of Counties' deputy director for public affairs, said the awards program originally was created in the mid-1990s partly to spread good ideas from county to county.

"Essentially it was created to recognize the most innovative programs that counties organize and develop," Liebler said. "They really look at how replicable a program could be."

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