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By Pete Nickeas

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217-525-8207

SPRINGFIELD -- Kankakee County now has another tool to keep young criminals out of prison -- "Redeploy Illinois."

Kankakee County was one of the first nine pilot sites for Redeploy Illinois -- a state program designed to plug juvenile offenders into local therapy and vocational training as a deterrent to crime.

The state program steers young criminals away from juvenile jails toward local agencies that provide recovery and outreach services, such as mental health treatment, life skills education, and substance abuse treatment.

Gov. Patrick Quinn signed into law last week a measure that made the pilot program a permanent venture across most of the state and Kankakee County will play a role in implementing it statewide.

The state gives money to counties, which can opt to participate in the program. Kankakee was one of five areas added to the pilot program earlier this year and given \$215,000 by the state to participate, shortly before the governor's action made the program permanent.

"I think we'll end up working with the Redeploy Oversight Board to go around the state and help get other counties involved.," said Kankakee County Juvenile Probation Supervisor Tom Latham.

Of Kankakee County's involvement in as one of the first nine Redeploy sites, Latham said, "It's not easy being part of the first group. ... But we decided we just had to jump in and do it."

Before making the program permanent, "Redeploy Illinois" was administered at four sites across the state for three years while its effects were studied. According to the Department of Human Services, more than 400 youths were diverted away from prison to community programs.

According to the most recent Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice data, more than half of the young criminals sent to jail in 2002 returned within three years.

Department of Human Services Spokesman Tom Green said the goal of the program is to reduce the recidivism rate among young criminals by getting them into alternative programs while they're young.

The legislation allows for the program to be implemented in up to 75 sites. It does not change the requirement that participating sites reapply for state money each fiscal year.

Leila Noelliste contributed to this story.