

Nighthawks' put the spotlight on Jackson-area parolees

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Katie Rausch | Jackson Citizen Patriot Parole officer Cheryl Evans and Jackson police officer Chad Dermeyer speak with a parolee before Evans administers a breathalyzer test during a house call on a recent Sunday night in Jackson. Several nights a month, parole officers swoop down on parolees in their homes to make sure they don't do something to land back in jail, and to keep neighborhoods safe.

Their mission is called Operation Nighthawk, and Jackson County parole officers ride with area law-enforcement officers to take part in the statewide program.

They stop at parolees' homes, sometimes after 11 p.m., which is some parolees' curfew. Some visits are five or 10 minutes. The officers perform breathalyzer tests, check tethers and look for contraband such as drugs and alcohol. Violations, including having a blood-alcohol level above 0.08 percent, give the parolee a one-way ticket back to jail.

"For the most part, it keeps them from re-offending, and that's keeping the public safer," Jackson Police Officer Chad Dermeyer said.

Parolees "are on parole 24 hours a day," said Steve Robinson, a Jackson County parole supervisor. "We expect them to comply with their parole even after hours."

'I expect it'

Jack Adams was released from prison the week before Parole Officer Cheryl Evans and Dermeyer knocked on his door about 10 p.m. recently.

Adams showed the officers around his new apartment. Evans searched his refrigerator and the rest of his home for alcohol. As a drunken-driver offender, he is not allowed to have any alcohol. Evans gave him a breathalyzer test, and he passed. She also checked to make sure his ankle tether, which measures his blood-alcohol content, was connected and working properly.

Finding Adams was in compliance, she congratulated him on getting his own place and offered advice on what home-cleaning products he could use that would not falsely trigger his alcohol-detection tether.

"It doesn't bother me. I expect it," Adams said of the late-night check-ins. "If I did something I wasn't supposed to, I'd be a total idiot."

Adams said it is good to know there is a chance Evans or another parole officer could come knocking on

their door at any time.

"There is temptation everywhere," he said. "You just have to be strong enough to resist it."

For Adams and other parolees, the nightly check-ins are all about accountability.

"It keeps people doing the right thing," said a local parolee.

And that parolee has been doing the right thing, Evans said. Before knocking on his door, Evans said she was proud of him and how he had been staying out of trouble and helping to take care of his mom.

The parolee asked not to be named because he had distanced himself from former associates to stay out of trouble, and he was not looking to go back.

"Contrary to popular belief, some of us do change and we need that opportunity," he said.

Checking things out

On a recent Sunday night, Evans and Dermeyer made 25 house calls to check that parolees were in compliance with the conditions of their parole. That night, no one was arrested or taken to jail. Typically, Evans said, her nights are arrest-free, but sometimes she has to take a person or two to jail.

On any given night, Evans said she checks on 20 to 40 parolees, giving them all breathalyzer tests and surveying the homes for drugs and alcohol.

"We are trying to get a parolee to do the right thing," Robinson said. "Most people appreciate the fact we are trying to get parolees to succeed and not be returned to prison."

There are 324 parolees living in Jackson County.

About 42 percent of parolees will re-offend and return to prison, said John Cordell, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Corrections.

"We send people back to prison when we have to," Robinson said. "But we are also out there to encourage success. A lot of people don't see that."

Building on that success is becoming more important as the state Legislature makes cuts to the budget, reducing funding to the Department of Corrections.

Michigan has seen an increase in the number of prisoners released on parole, and with further cuts to state Department of Corrections the number could rise, Robinson said.

Operation Nighthawk has been in Jackson for about 10 years, teaming parole officers with patrol officers.

The parolees are selected at random for the night visits or at the suggestion of parole officers, Evans said. Visits are more frequent to parolees who have a higher risk of re-offending, she said. In addition to submitting to the late-night check-ins, parolees still have to meet with their assigned parole officers during the day, Robinson said. Those visits can be once a week or once a month.

Parole officer's role

Robinson said each parole officer is encouraged to develop a good working relationship with the parolee and his or her family, friends and neighbors. The night visits facilitate that.

"We are not saying we want the parole officers to become their friends," Robinson said. "We can't do it alone. It is very important to develop a good rapport with parolees and their family to successfully see them through their parole term."

Many of the parolees and their families know Evans by name. She asks about their children or for updates on a situation they may have encountered during their last visit.

"A lot of these guys want to make it. This helps," Evans said. "It's great to see them changing their life. It is always a reward."

Often she stops to talk to family members and neighbors, asking about the parolee.

"We only see (parolees) a few hours," Evans said. "(Family members and neighbors) see them all day long."

Operation Nighthawk is a winning program for parolees and parole officers, and area police agencies also see it as an important tool.

With parolees being integrated into neighborhoods, Jackson Deputy Police Chief John Holda said it is important for officers to know where parolees are located, helping to increase public safety.

"It makes the community feel safer because they are being checked on," Holda said.

The program also increases police presence in the neighborhoods, Robinson and Holda agreed.

The parole officers ride with different police officers each night, Holda said, allowing the officers to build relationships with one another. Evans said if she receives a call and needs a parolee to be checked on immediately, she is able to call officers for assistance.

"It is a benefit to us and them," Holda said. "We both help to make sure the parolees abide by the laws and rules they have been released from prison on."