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NEWS RELEASE

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PORTSMOUTH SHERIFF'S OFFICE ALTERNATIVE WORK PROGRAM OFFERS CITY MANY ADVANTAGES

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(Portsmouth, VA) As the saying goes, "Where there's a will, there's a way." Especially when it comes to the Alternative Work Program offered through the Portsmouth Sheriff's Office.

In 1987, Sheriff Gary W. Waters created the Alternative Work Program (AWP) so that non-violent inmates could help the city by cleaning the roads and highways, and cutting grass on city property. "They literally pick up tons and tons of trash weekly, which saves the taxpayer that expense of paying for the service", says Sheriff Waters.

One of the first projects was cleaning up a mountain of trash which had accumulated behind Choate Street off of Rodman Avenue. Capt. W.J. Layes, who was the first officer in charge of the AWP, remembered his crew being in that area for nearly 6 weeks. "It was really something", he said, "and residents were extremely grateful for the work we did."

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Alternative Work Program
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Only those inmates who have been convicted of non-violent crimes are considered for the program. In this case, non-violent is defined as sentences of 2 years or less. Some examples are petty larceny, third offense petty larceny, non-support, and traffic crimes such as DUI, Driving on a Suspended License, and Habitual Offender.

The number of inmates typically in the program is eight. While out on a job, an armed deputy is with the crew at all times. The crew wears bright orange jumpsuits, which are labeled, PORTSMOUTH CITY JAIL. Deputy Bryan Smith, who supervises the road crew, advises the crew is "very visible". The inmates are dispatched daily, Monday through Friday. There are some instances where the crew will be utilized on weekends.

What is astonishing are the numbers....in 1991, the totals were: 14,543 work hours; 74,988 pounds of trash, which works out to 37.49 tons. Hours worked at the Portsmouth Police Stables were 802. To date in 1992, 13, 672 hours; 75, 180 pounds of trash, equaling approximately 37.5 tons. According to Sgt. Benzie, who supervises the program for the department, "There is no way to tell how much the Alternative Work Program has saved the city in terms of tax dollars. But I would have to say it is a substantial amount."

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Specifically, the Alternative Work Crew is responsible for maintaining the on/off ramps at Victory Blvd, Greenwood Drive, Effingham Street, and Frederick Blvd. The roadways are Des Moines, Cavalier Blvd to Victory Blvd, Rotunda Street, and Elmhurst Lane. Aluminum cans are always recycled.

Another important task for the group is washing, feeding, and cleaning the horses in the Portsmouth Police Department Horse Patrol daily. They also clean the stables, walk the horses, and ready them for the officers prior to their shifts. Additionally, the Alternative Work crew also provides assistance for city departments. For example, they help move Portsmouth Museum exhibits, and have provided painting for the museums. When the city had the asbestos removal for the main library branch, the Alternative Work Crew was there to move shelving, books and furniture around. The city has also used the crew to move furniture from one department to another when offices are moved to another site. The crew is used to cut the grass at the Portsmouth Sheriff's Office D.A.R.E. House and the Police Department Crime Prevention House, both which are located in Fairwood Homes. In 1990 the crew was responsible for laying the new Pokey Smokey Railroad tracks at City Park.

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Probably one of the largest jobs was in the summer of 1990, when CSX Railroad requested assistance with clearing out trash around the multiple tracks between Ida Barbar and Swanson Homes. During the two week clean up period, the crew loaded two and a half tractor trailer flat bed trucks with trashed furniture, appliances,...."you name it," said Sgt. Benzie, AWP Director. "You're talking tons and tons of trash" he added. The crews are also "on-call" for civic league clean-up projects. And three times weekly the crew washes the jail windows and sweeps the patio surrounding the jail.

And the reward for these inmates? According to Sgt. Benzie, "Their only reward is time off. They get a third off their sentence, plus five days for every 30 that they're in the program. This makes a good incentive to stay in the program." Sgt. Benzie stated they have never had any serious problems with inmates involved in the program. Inmates with poor work habits, laziness, or poor attitudes have been removed from the program and placed back into the main jail facility.

The Alternative Work participants, along with Work Release inmates, are housed in a separate area from the main jail facility. This building, which is essentially a stationary double-wide trailer, is situated beside the old Coast Guard Base,

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near the Police Department horse stables. There is room for a total of 28 inmates in the trailer. The facility is complete with separated rooms with bunk beds and lockers; bathroom area in the rear, and t.v. and books to read.

The only drawback to being in the Alternative Work program is that participants cannot receive visitors. This is because there is no place provided for this, and it could result in a security risk.

"That isn't too bad" according to "Limmie", a AWP participant.

Generally these inmates are not in custody too long. Limmie, who is in jail for non-payment of child support, said being in the AWP helps him to get motivated and prepared to go out to work. "Earl", another inmate in the program, said that after picking up so much litter on the roadways it will make him think about ever littering again.

They say, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness". That may or may not be so in this case. However, with all the benefits coming from this program, one cannot help to think that it's close!

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