

More than \$450,000 in Recovery Act funding is headed to the Columbia County Sheriff's Office to provide mental health services to inmates for the first time.

Sheriff Jeff Dickerson says the grant is designed to provide needed mental health professional services 20 hours per week in the jail, and to add additional security for mental health patients receiving services while incarcerated in the jail. The grant is scheduled to run for two years beginning October 1.

"A sizable amount of the people brought in to our jail have at least some degree of need for mental health services," Dickerson said. "I made the case to the Justice Department that even a modest amount of mental health service could make a huge difference over what we've had -- something is better than nothing. Thankfully, help will be on its way, soon."

The grant calls for a competitive process to identify a correctional mental health provider to provide the equivalent to a half-time, professional mental health position in the jail. The grant will also fund two extra correctional deputies to focus on mental health security issues. These deputy positions will be funded through the two-year grant period.

The sheriff's office learned we had been awarded the grant last month, but the effort also required the consent of the Columbia County Board of Commissioners, which agreed to accept the grant award last week. County Chair Rita Bernhard welcomed the grant award, saying it was an opportunity for the county to provide services in the jail that have been needed for a very long time.

Now the process begins to identify the mental health services provider and to get the two new corrections deputies on board. Sheriff Dickerson said that, although the grant period has already begun, the competitive process required by the grant, and the hiring and training process at the sheriff's office means it will be after the first of the year before the program becomes fully operational.

"We will work as hard as we can to get this up and running as quickly as possible," he said.