Community service for DWI

By Betsy Cook

Community service work and driver improvement and substance abuse programs have been the emphasis in the sentencing of DWI offenders under the new state law.

That law went into effect in January, passed by state legislators in an effort to crack down on drunken drivers.

The new law requires that on a first conviction, an offender shall be fined from $125 to $500, and spend ten days to six months in the parish jail. However, that sentence can be suspended if the offender serves two days in jail, and participates in a court-approved substance abuse and driver improvement program, or perform four eight-hour days of court-approved community service activities as well as participate in a substance abuse and driver improvement program.

So far, District 16 judges have opted for the community service program rather than jail time, and overcrowded jails is one reason.

"Jail population problems is one reason, but the real key to sentencing is the prior driving record," said Assistant District Attorney Jimmy Sennette.

In the recent sentencing of one DWI offender, Judge Michael J. McNulty, Jr. handed down a 30 day jail sentence. "It depends on the circumstances surrounding the crime and the prior record," said McNulty.

Judge Edward A. delaHoussaye III sentenced five DWI offenders on March 10, to 100 days in the parish jail, but suspended that portion of the sentence and placed the offenders on supervised probation for two years.

In addition, each offender is required to attend the driver's improvement and substance abuse program, as well as completion of four eight hour days of community service work.

Chief Deputy Paul Keenze of the St. Mary Parish Sheriff's office said library, hospital and park work will encompass the community service work. "We sent one guy over to the Berwick police department to clean the cells," said Keenze. "Since baseball season is opening, we will have some cleaning up the parks. We'll have someone doing city hall janitorial work."

The St. Mary Parish Mental Health Center in Bayou Vista will conduct the driver improvement and substance abuse course. Carl Anderson, a substance abuse mental health counselor at the center, and Eileen Grigg, a registered nurse, will instruct the offenders. The classes are scheduled to begin March 28. Offenders will attend a minimum of eight hours in classes, Anderson said.

"We will focus on how alcohol and substance abuse affects one's driving abilities, and touch on alcoholism, its aspects, dangers, symptoms and signs," Anderson said.