

BEHIND BARS WITHOUT THE BASICS

Overcrowded and understaffed jail leaves inmates without necessities

BY SHELLY BRADBURY

STAFF WRITER

As Chief of Corrections Joe Fowler walked through the first floor of the Hamilton County Jail on Wednesday, the men in the crowded cells rushed to bang on the doors.

"No toilet paper in here, man," one inmate called out from inside a cell filled with at least 15 men.

The cell has no beds, just a cement bench built into the wall, a toilet and a sink. When Fowler approached, some men were sleeping side-by-side on the floor, with just blankets, no mats. Some were sitting on the bench, backs against the wall, elbow-to-elbow. A few stood, but there was nearly no room to walk around without stepping on someone.

As Fowler walked by that cell, and then others, the men inside jumped to their feet.

"I just want to brush my teeth," an inmate shouted.

"I've been here 10 days with no shower, I swear to God," another man hollered.

"Been here seven days, no toothbrush," came another shout.

"Come smell me and I'll prove it," someone else offered.

But Fowler doesn't need proof. He knows the problem well.

On Wednesday, he told the Times Free Press he believes the jail is failing to provide acceptable living conditions and general hygiene to inmates.

The facility has been running over its maximum capacity for years, and both the inmates and jail staff are paying the price daily in living conditions and safety.

Although the jail's maximum rated capacity for inmates is 505, there were 537 people housed there Wednesday. In 2015, the jail's average daily population was 565, according to the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office, with just 159 corrections employees.

Arrestees come in on the first floor, which is designed as a temporary holding area. There, people who have just been arrested wait to be booked and inmates going out wait to be released. The floor contains holding cells intended for hours-long stays — they don't have beds or showers.

Once inmates are booked, they're moved upstairs to larger cells with beds and showers. But because the jail is too full, some inmates are spending days on the first floor, waiting to be booked or for a bed to open upstairs.

On Wednesday morning, there were 78 inmates on the jail's first floor.

These people have no access to showers because the two shower cells on the first floor also are being used to house inmates. A person who needs to be kept apart from other inmates — because of health, intoxication, belligerence or mental illness — is put in one of the showers, Fowler said.

The jail's problems aren't new.

In 2013, a study by the University of Tennessee's County Technical Assistance Service found the jail needed 55 new positions to meet appropriate staffing levels, and concluded that current staff were at risk because of low manpower. And in November 2015, an inspection by the Tennessee Corrections Institute concluded the jail did not meet the state's minimum standards because of low staffing and overcrowding.

But little has been done.

Fowler recently made seven emergency hires and has a new class of nine corrections officers graduating in April. Until then, he's planning to take the jail staff from eight-hour shifts to 12-hour shifts — that's the only way to have enough staff working with the 159 people he's got now. He guesses that on average, inmates spend less than two days on the first floor.

"We are doing everything we can," he said. "And what is not getting done is not because of a lack of care or effort. I think with the resources we're given, we're doing the best we can. Brushing their teeth is a huge thing, but in the grand scheme it's not life safety."

David Stanford's descent into addiction started slowly, when he was a high school basketball player in a small Ohio town.

"One thing led to another, and before we all knew it, he was popping pills and Oxycontin and going to parties and getting in trouble for underage drinking," said his mother, Tammy Young, who lives in Chattanooga.

When the family cut him off, Stanford turned to heroin.

"And heroin just kind of landed him in quite a mess," Young said. "He was homeless."

She flew him to a rehab facility in Florida, but Stanford wouldn't stay. In 2013, he was arrested on drug-related offenses in Florida. He was sentenced to just over three years of probation in 2014.

And he got clean.

"He turned it around, you know? He did well," Young said. "We got him back here, got him on probation, and he was doing well."

But last Friday, Stanford, now 27 and competing as a bodybuilder, was pulled over for driving with an expired tag and arrested on an open warrant — his probation officer says Stanford has failed to report since September 2015, a claim Young disputes.

Stanford was dropped off at the Hamilton County Jail at 12:34 a.m. Saturday. For two days, he sat in a holding cell without any paperwork being filed. He slept on the floor. He wasn't given a toothbrush or offered a shower. He wasn't officially booked into the jail until Monday.

And then, even after the paperwork was filed, he spent another day on the first floor. He was moved upstairs to a regular cell Wednesday.

"This is crazy, and the system is so broken," said Amanda Ball, Stanford's sister. "It shouldn't be this way. I don't expect for the inmates to be — it's not a

vacation — but at the same time, I don't care who you are or what you've done, you deserve basic human rights."

The staff on the first floor are responsible for booking and releasing inmates, feeding the floor and checking on each inmate at least every 40 minutes, Fowler said.

There should be six staff members on the first floor, he said, but "we're lucky if we have four."

And each shift typically starts with a backlog of booking and release paperwork to be filed, Fowler added.

"When they start night shift, they may have 30 people waiting to be booked, another 60 come in, and then they've also got to juggle releases, food," he said.

Of the jail's six floors, Fowler said, usually only one is fully staffed at any given time. As he walked the first floor Wednesday and listened to the inmates' complaints and worries, an officer cracked open the door to a nearby holding cell and waved a small cardboard box in the air.

"Who wants toothbrushes?" he shouted.

The men snatched them up and started brushing their teeth immediately. A few people shouted that the officer was putting on a show for the media.

"I ain't never got a toothbrush down here," one handcuffed man scoffed.

A few cells over, an inmate flagged Fowler down. The inmate leaned close to the crack in the cell door to be heard.

"Nothing was happening until I talked to you," the man said. "I don't know who you are. But whatever your job is, you're trying."

Technically, Silverdale Correctional Facility is supposed to house only people serving sentences after they've been found guilty.

But the county-owned jail, operated under contract by Corrections Corporation of America, can sleep just over 1,000 inmates. And for years, the Hamilton County Jail has been sending pretrial inmates to Silverdale.

The county and CCA have an agreement that allows the jail to ship certain inmates — inmates without felony charges, with bonds below \$100,000, who haven't been charged with murder or attempted murder and who don't have any physical or mental illnesses — to Silverdale, which houses them and hauls them to and from court.

On Wednesday, Silverdale was housing 434 pretrial inmates — almost half of its total 929 population that day. That included 131 women, who can't be held long-term at the Hamilton County Jail.

The 303 pretrial men in Silverdale would be in the downtown jail if not for the agreement. On Wednesday, those 303 people would have put the jail's population at 840 — well over the 505 maximum capacity.

Local politicians and Sheriff Jim Hammond have debated the need for a new jail for years. In June 2015, county Mayor Jim Coppinger told commissioners he was considering selling the Silverdale facility to CCA and having CCA build and operate a new jail to replace the downtown facility.

That set off alarms in the sheriff's office, with jail staff concerned their jobs were in jeopardy.

But CCA's 31-year contract to operate Silverdale runs out in September. So in January, county commissioners voted to seek a private company to build and operate a new county jail. In February, three companies, including CCA, expressed interest in the deal.

The county is vetting their qualifications and those who qualify may submit proposals for a new jail. The commission hopes to pick a winning bidder by July, records show.

But the county hasn't set a timeline for a new facility — or even agreed to build it — and the process of approval and construction will likely take years. Hammond will need to sign off on every part of the process, Coppinger said.

"The sheriff will be engaged the whole way," Coppinger said. "So far, he's been extremely cooperative. He wants to protect the employees he's got and make sure they've got jobs. And we agree with him."

But building a new jail is a long-term, complicated process, Coppinger added. A new facility is at least a year — and probably years — down the road.

And in the meantime, the jail is still full. And still understaffed.

Last year, Hammond asked Coppinger to fund the salaries of 10 new corrections officers and four new records clerks in the year's budget, but that didn't happen.

Coppinger said concerns about jail staffing will likely be brought up again during this year's budget process.

Asked about the sheriff's budget Friday, Commissioner Joe Graham said the commission can't dictate how the sheriff spends his money, and that keeping the jail operating appropriately is the sheriff's responsibility.

"The fact of the matter his budget is bigger today than it's ever been," Graham said. "We have no control over how he spends it and how he staffs his department."

Commission Chairman Chester Bankston said Friday he last toured the jail about six or seven months ago, and the commission gives the sheriff enough money to handle "the necessities."

"It's the sheriff's job to keep the jail," he said. "We usually give him some, but sometimes we can't give him all he asks for. He never fails to get the necessities of what has to be done. Programs and stuff like that we might not always be able to fund."

But he also said he wasn't aware some inmates weren't able to shower.

"I know we're overcrowded," he said. "I didn't know it was that bad. Putting them in the shower instead of using the shower."

Contact staff writer

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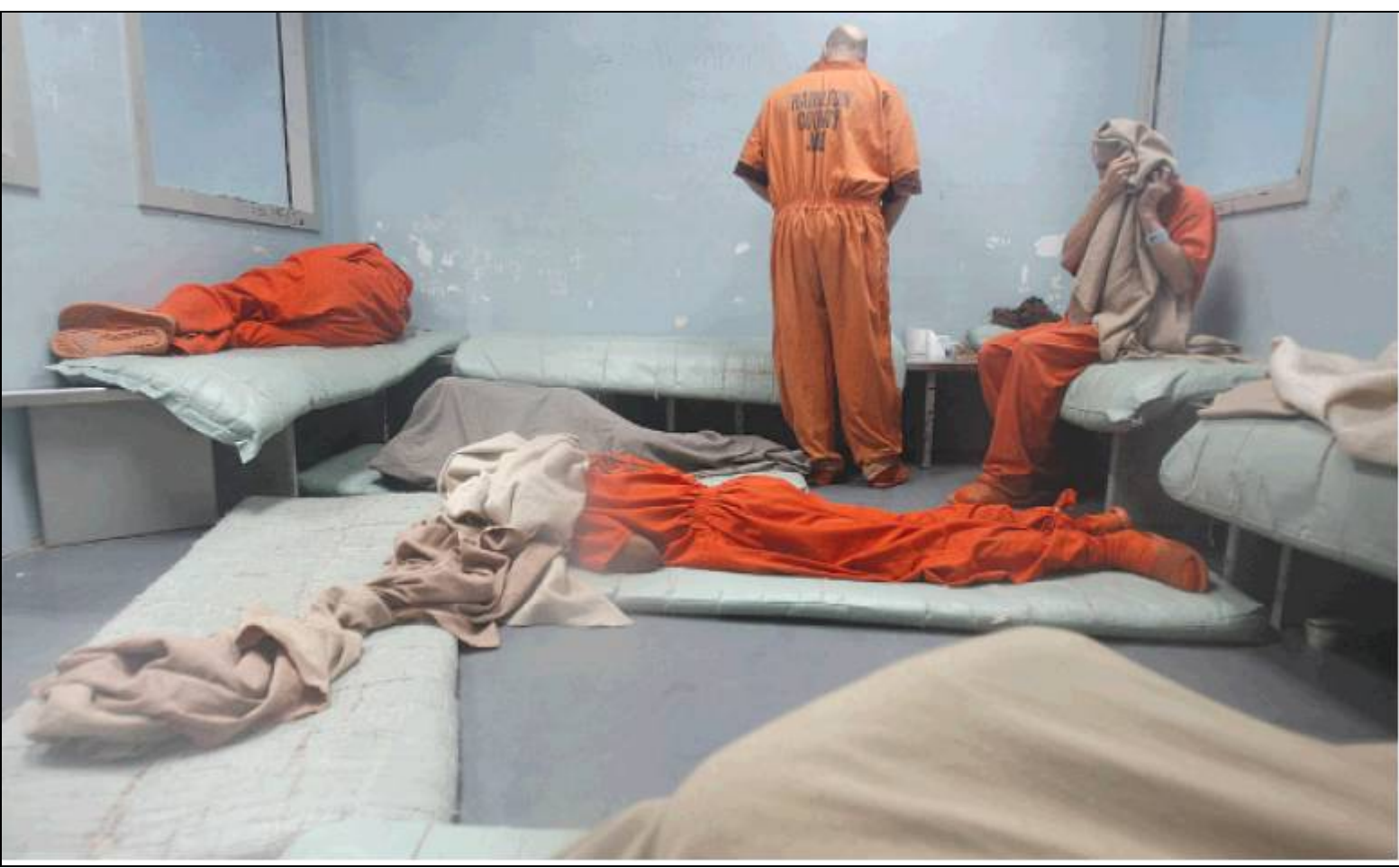
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Too many
The average daily population at the Hamilton County Jail exceeds the facility's

maximum rated capacity of 505 inmates.

- › 2015: 565
- › 2014: 552
- › 2013: 505
- › 2012: 518
- › 2011: 516
- › 2010: 608

Source: Hamilton County Sheriff's Office



STAFF FILE PHOTO

Inmates sit along the wall and lie on the floor as they wait to be assigned a cell upstairs at the Hamilton County Jail, in this photo from 2009. Little has changed at the jail, which has been persistently overcrowded for many years.



STAFF FILE PHOTO

Inmates at the Hamilton County Jail complain they don't have necessities such as toilet paper and toothbrushes.

Hamilton County Jail Critical Incidents, 2014

- › Use of force reports by staff: 212
- › Assault, offender on offender: 120
- › Suicide attempts: 59
- › Assault, offender on staff: 31
- › Suicides: 2
- › Offender medical referral: 2
- › Natural death: 1
- › Lockdown: 0
- › Escapes: 0
- › 4/5 point

restraints used: 0

Source: Hamilton County
Sheriff's Office 2014
Annual Report