

County Jailer, 50, Throttled in Escape by 2

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A Hamilton County jailer remains in critical condition at Erlanger Medical Center's Surgical Intensive Care Unit after being assaulted during a jail break early Thursday morning. Officer Dennis Tate, 50, working alone in a maximum-security area of the downtown jail, was choked and then beaten with his own set of jail keys by Mark Caldwell, 19, and Nikia Grasty, 21, said Sheriff John Cupp. Both men were caught shortly after they leaped from the jail's third floor about 12:30 a.m. A shortage of jailers may have aided the men in their escape attempt. An evaluation by the Tennessee Corrections Institute recommends that the jail place three guards on each floor, Sheriff Cupp said. "We try to keep two on the third floor, but we only had one there last night," Sheriff Cupp said. "They (TCI) have written us up for many years for lack of people on the floor and lack of safety." There were 491 inmates in the jail on Wednesday night. The jail was designed to hold 477 but has held as many as 650 in past months, Sheriff Cupp said. An additional 79 jailers are needed to bring the jail up to TCI standards. "The problem is finding people to fill these spots," Sheriff Cupp said. The record-low unemployment rate and the low starting salary make it hard to hire and keep jailers. Capt. Jim Hart, chief of the Hamilton County Jail, said the short-lived escape began when the cellmates called Officer Tate to their cell on the pretense that the toilet was broken. Mr. Grasty asked to use the commode in the day room. When Officer Tate opened the cell and spoke to Mr. Caldwell, Mr. Grasty got behind the officer and choked him with what was believed to be a shirt, Capt. Hart said. Mr. Caldwell took the jailer's keys and used them to beat Officer Tate on the head. The two inmates dragged him inside the cell before they made their way to a guard unit and used the keys to access the control center. The two then removed a set of snippers, which they used to cut the security screen from a window in a guard walkway. Capt. Hart said the men smashed the window and jumped to the fifth floor of the adjacent parking garage. A Chattanooga police officer who was parked in the sally port of the jail heard the window being smashed and sounded the alert. Sheriff Cupp said inmates pounded on their cells to call attention to what happened to Officer Tate. He said the officer, a 20-year-veteran, was well liked by the inmates. Mr. Grasty injured one foot and his back in the fall and was taken into custody by Officer Richard Gough of the sheriff's department. He was taken to Erlanger Medical Center for treatment. Mr. Caldwell was apprehended in an alley south of Seventh Street between Walnut and Cherry streets by Officer Joe Fletcher, police reports said. Mr. Caldwell had been in the Hamilton County Jail since Jan. 16, 1998. He is charged with the 1998 murder of Roy Mack Hunter of Flintstone, Ga. Mr. Grasty was convicted of aggravated assault and was sentenced to 11 months and 29 days in the Hamilton County Workhouse. He was arrested in December of 1998 on charges of aggravated assault, theft over \$500, aggravated rape, burglary, theft of property. Sheriff Cupp said that both men are now facing additional charges of especially aggravated kidnapping, aggravated kidnapping, aggravated assault, escape and vandalism.