

County jail 'chronically underfunded'

By Chris Joyner Staff Writer

Stenciled on a door in the Hamilton County Jail is "2TH" -- code for second-floor, temporary housing. Inside, 23 prisoners are sprawled in rows on plastic trays overlaid with mattresses in what was once a prisoner recreation room.

"This was just a temporary fix a couple of years ago," said County Corrections Chief Jim Hart. "Now it's permanent."

According to a recent Hamilton County grand jury inspection and report, Chief Hart's jail is well-ordered, clean and efficient. But, he said, it also is overcrowded, short-staffed and chronically underfunded.

This year, Chief Hart is looking for solutions from the Hamilton County Commission. His wish list for the jail's \$8.9 million budget includes additional staff, funds for renovating areas of the jail and money to beef up security and surveillance of the 600-plus inmates kept in a space designed to handle 489.

Sheriff John Cupp will defend his department's budget requests before the county commissioners May 13.

But as the commissioners face another tight budget year, Chief Hart is realistic about his chances. For the past month, commissioners have been fending off angry parents, students and educators demanding the county head off \$7.98 million in budget cuts proposed by Hamilton County Schools Superintendent Jesse Register.

And past the schools, commissioners have a line of department heads waiting with outstretched hands.

The jail's problems are not news to county officials. County Executive Claude Ramsey has repeatedly mentioned them in rebuffing suggestions the county should dip into its cash reserves to bail out the school district. Commission Chairman Bill Hullander said the commissioners will do everything they can to help.

Chief Hart said he knows convincing public officials to provide additional funding for jails is difficult. Inmates are not nearly as popular as school children when it comes to slicing up the budget pie, he said.

"They've only got so many dollars to deal with," Chief Hart said.

But, placing his hand on the shoulder of Sgt. Tim Akins, one of the jail supervisors, Chief Hart said his requests are about more than just prisoners.

"We're in this environment, too," he said.

Mr. Ramsey is seeking funding from the federal government to build a new 128-bed jail at the Silverdale Workhouse. As of Friday, Mr. Ramsey had received no confirmation from the U.S. Marshals Service about funding for the \$5 million add-on at Silverdale.

Even if that funding comes through, Chief Hart said he will need the additional funds in his request for downtown jail improvements.

After the county jail underwent a renovation in 1993, an outside audit determined 160 officers were needed to adequately run the facility, Chief Hart said. The jail has 140 corrections officers, and he said covering all the checkpoints in the jails' six stories and two basement floors is a challenge.

"We're on a mandatory overtime program right now just to cover the posts," he said. "I have a tremendous amount of (officers) who have stepped up to provide supervisory duties, but we're not paying them for it."

Chief Hart said many of his officers pull double duty, filling in on jobs that would otherwise go undone.

On the first floor of the downtown building, food service manager Jim Hughes Sr. oversees preparations for lunch. Because the jail has funding for only one food service position, Mr. Hughes has deputized two of the jail's corrections officers to work alongside trustees in filling hundreds of trays distributed across the jail.

"We try to get people with food service backgrounds," Chief Hart said, explaining how officers are chosen for the duty.

In the proposed jail budget, Chief Hart has asked for six new corrections officers and four food service workers. If he gets his wish, the new food service positions will allow his officers to retire their hair nets and spend more time guarding inmates instead of feeding them.

In the kitchen, Mr. Hughes runs a tight ship. The jail serves 54,000 meals a month for an average cost of 77 cents, he said. Mr. Hughes pinches pennies by baking his own bread and making everything from scratch.

"Except the corn dogs," he said.

But he faces challenges, too. Once the trays are filled, they are loaded onto heated carts and taken for distribution. Because of overcrowding, the carts -- each of which holds 58 trays -- are heaped with trays balanced on top.

"We have 130 people on the first floor, and we've only got one cart," he said.

Sgt. Akins jokingly refers to the sixth floor of the jail, where medium-security prisoners are housed, as the "penthouse suite." The windows do offer a spectacular view of downtown Chattanooga and the mountains beyond, if you can see past the bars and wire mesh.

Prisoners who want to get a look at the view have to wait their turn. Bunks and temporary cots are crammed into every available space on the floor. One room that was a prison library is now home to more than a dozen people.

The county jail does not meet state standards on space, Chief Hart said. But he said the jail is well-run otherwise, so inspectors let the overcrowding go.

"We're pretty good in all areas. It's just we've got too many people," he said.

Inmate population is not the only thing agencies look at when inspecting prisons, according to Joe Wheedon, legislative liaison for the American Correctional Association, a jail accrediting association.

"When you look at facilities, you have to look at each one individually," he said. "It depends on how well the institution is run, as well as how it is designed."

The Hamilton County Jail is not accredited by the American Correctional Association, but Mr. Wheedon said a jail exceeding its capacity is not at all unusual.

"Most of the state institutions are over capacity, but that doesn't mean they are overcrowded," he said.

Reports released last week by both the regular and concurrent grand juries determined the Hamilton County Jail needs help. After touring the jail, both grand juries reported the jail is well-managed but overcrowded.

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