

Empty cells in county jail Inmates shifted to Silverdale facility, easing overcrowded conditions

By Candice Combs Staff Writer

Hamilton County Jail officials this week said they saw something they haven't seen in years — empty cells.

Since January, the inmate population for the downtown jail has dropped steadily as a 128-bed expansion at Silverdale Workhouse began housing the county's pretrial and federal inmates, said Chief Jim Hart, jail supervisor for the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department.

"All areas of confinement are taxed when population numbers are up," Chief Hart said. "When we drop to normal ranges, the staff, the inmates and the building get a break."

An average of 660 people have spent the night at the Hamilton County Jail for the last two years — 171 more than the 489-person capacity, Chief Hart said. In 2003, the inmate population exceeded 700 on some days.

On Thursday, the number dipped to 541. In February, the jail has averaged 549 inmates a day.

Reimbursements for housing federal inmates follows detainees from one facility to another, so the Hamilton County Jail could lose an estimated \$951,000 if all federal inmates are housed at Silverdale, records show. The federal government pays \$60.75 a day, or \$3.3 million a year on average, to Hamilton County's jail for keeping those inmates.

That lost revenue could hurt the downtown facility where about 150 of the average inmate population were federal inmates, officials said. That money will continue to be controlled by the county, but will move to the Silverdale facility, officials said.

Corrections Corporation of America, contracted by the county to run Silverdale, will not get any more money from the transfer of inmates from the county jail.

Those detainees, some now staying at Silverdale, also spent money on telephone calls, snacks and other services, according to Bill Smith, the jail's chaplain. The profit from those sales was additional revenue for the jail.

"This could be a financial nightmare for the chief," Mr. Smith said. "We won't have all the money that we've had."

However, Chief Hart said that with fewer inmates, there will be less expense associated with housing them. The county also must pay for federal and pretrial inmates' food, medicine and doctor's visits.

"There is a reduction in revenue, but also a reduction in total costs," he said. "It's really too early to say whether we will come out in the bad or good." Further financial pains could come with Gov. Phil Bredesen's proposal to halve the state's daily reimbursements to county jails from \$32 to \$16 for every state inmate above the jail's capacity. It costs Hamilton County \$43.38 a day to house an inmate, or a total of \$2.4 million a year. That number was \$43.57 a day last year for Silverdale.

But Gov. Bredesen said Wednesday he may reconsider the plan to cut \$1.5 million in reimbursements to local jails. That proposal could cost Hamilton County \$375,000 a year, which Sheriff John Cupp called "disastrous."

Sheriff's department Capt. John Swope said he remembers a time when pallets were spread across most of the booking area's floor for inmates to sleep. Now, once someone is arrested, they only spend a few hours in the holding cells instead of days.

"It's given us the opportunity to paint, decorate — just do some housekeeping," he said. Also, an indoor recreation room was scrapped last year after jailers moved in beds to house Hispanic inmates, Mr. Smith said. That facility has now been reopened and provides a place for the population to play basketball and participate in other activities.

"It's really made a difference," he said.

The stress on jailers and inmates also has been relieved, making it more comfortable for everyone, Capt. Swope said. When 15 people are packed into a cell designed for 12, tensions can run high, he said.

"We can be proactive now instead of reactive," Capt. Swope said. "It gives us more time to do a better job."

E-mail Candice Combs at ccombs@timesfreepress.com

