

## Hamilton jail population soars; inspection nears

By Brian Lazenby Staff Writer

The inmate population Tuesday at the Hamilton County Jail soared to a near-record level with 745 prisoners housed at the 490-bed facility, a jail official said.

Chief Jim Hart, jail supervisor, said he is unsure of the exact record daily population, but recent totals are close.

"It's up there," he said. "We've been in the 700s before, and we've probably been above that."

Still, the rising numbers are cause for concern, he said.

"The main concern is the welfare and safety of those in custody and those that work here," Chief Hart said.

The jail lost its certification in December 2006 because of overcrowding, but it was recertified in January after the county approved a 128-bed expansion at the Silverdale Detention Center.

Peggy Sawyer, assistant director of the Tennessee Corrections Institute, which inspects correctional facilities and makes recommendations to the agency's Board of Control, said the Hamilton County Jail was recertified based on its "plan of action" to correct the overcrowding problem with the Silverdale expansion project.

The jail's most recent inspection was June 26, and it must be inspected again no later than Sept. 26, she said.

If progress on the expansion project is not deemed satisfactory by jail inspectors, Ms. Sawyer said it is possible that the jail could be decertified again.

"During this reinspection we will look at the progress of the 128-bed expansion," she said. "If the board feels the 128 beds will alleviate overcrowding and they are making progress, then the jail will remain certified."

Neither Silverdale officials nor Hamilton County Mayor Claude Ramsey returned calls Tuesday seeking comment.

Two weeks ago, Mr. Ramsey said construction on the expansion had not begun. He said the county is expected to accept construction bids next month.

If the jail is decertified again, Ms. Sawyer said, it would put the county at a greater risk to lawsuits by inmates and could mean higher insurance premiums for the county. Chief Hart said maintaining the facilities certification is a concern, but his main objective is safety. The reason the jail was decertified a year ago was because of crowding, he said. "We're still crowded," he said. "We've been crowded for 12 years now." Chief Hart attributed the rising population numbers to the time of year and effective policing.

"People breaking the law are being arrested and put in jail," he said.

The jail's inmate counts typically are higher between July and November than at other times of the year, Chief Hart said.

E-mail Brian Lazenby at [blazenby@timesfreepress.com](mailto:blazenby@timesfreepress.com)



Jim Hart

**BY THE NUMBERS**

The Hamilton County Jail is often over its rated inmate capacity. On Tuesday, the jail population soared to near record level. Below are the average populations for the past three months and the population Tuesday.

- Capacity: 490
- June: 607
- July: 609
- August: 644
- Tuesday: 745

Source: Hamilton County Jail





Staff File Photo by Dan Henry

Inmates try to sleep while housed in an overflow area on the second floor of the Hamilton County Jail.