

Jail regains certified status

By Jacqueline Koch jkoch@timesfreepress.com

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Three months after failing to meet certification standards, the Hamilton County Jail has been recertified, thanks to alleviating a chronic overcrowding problem at the downtown facility.

An inspection by the Tennessee Corrections Institute on Sept. 4 found the 490-bed jail was over capacity, said G.A. Bennett, director of support services for the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office.

"The real issue was our overcrowding," he said. "There was some painting and floor tile work needed in the kitchen and an (air conditioning unit) for our booking area, but these are items that would not decertify an institution. The overcrowding could."

Jail officials met again with TCI personnel on Oct. 30 to discuss a plan to decrease the population. The plan was implemented Nov. 27 by moving inmates to a new wing in the Silverdale Detention Center on Standifer Gap Road.

Before the move of about 50 inmates, the jail's population hovered around 560. After inmates were transferred to Silverdale and/or released because their sentences expired, the number was at 489, the first time in years the jail reached a population that low, Mr. Bennett said.

TCI personnel officially accepted the plan to reduce the number of inmates and found ongoing maintenance work and no other deficiencies during a surprise visit Wednesday, at which time it recertified the jail, sheriff's department spokeswoman Janice Atkinson said.

"TCI certification also ensures that proper medical care and hygiene items are provided to inmates," she said. "It inspects the condition of the jail building and ensures that it is clean and sanitary."

Another inspection could occur in January, but the annual event more likely will take place later in 2009, Mr. Bennett said.

"For TCI to walk in unannounced at any given time and have our jail pass an inspection with flying colors speaks highly of the jail administration ... and their staff and Sheriff (Jim) Hammond's goal for that facility," he said.

About two weeks ago, the sheriff's office appointed Chief Deputy Richard Schockley as jail administrator, joining Capt. John Swope, who handled those duties after the departure of

Chief Jim Hart.

CERTIFICATION BENEFITS

It requires that jail officials develop a comprehensive, uniform set of policies and procedures.

Certification strengthens accountability within the sheriff's office.

Certification can limit liability exposure because the Tennessee Corrections Institute will testify in court about conditions of confinement, if needed.

Certification supports the department's goals for professional excellence.

Source: G.A. Bennett, Hamilton County Sheriff's Office