

Jail numbers rising again
County officials satisfied with overall reduction in inmates
By Kathleen Baydala Staff Writer

Efforts to alleviate overcrowding at the Hamilton County Jail by transferring inmates to Silverdale and implementing alternative sentencing programs have provided only temporary relief, correction officials said. "Our population started to decline from January (when the average daily population was more than 590) to a record low in July of 493," said James Hart, chief of the jail.

But by September, the average daily population had climbed to 571, he said. The jail was built in 1974 to hold a maximum of 489 inmates.

County government officials said they are satisfied with the reduction in inmate numbers. In 2003, the jail's daily population hovered around 660 inmates and exceeded 700 on several counts. "The jail has not been nearly as crowded as it has been," Commissioner Larry Henry said. "All things are pointing in a positive direction."

Mr. Henry chaired the commission's Security and Corrections Committee until this month, when commissioners were reassigned. During his chairmanship, a review of the county jail by a South Carolina-based consulting team suggested county officials use space at the Silverdale Workhouse and alternative sentencing programs to reduce overcrowding at the jail.

A 128-bed addition to the Silverdale Workhouse late last year allowed corrections officers to transfer inmates from the county jail. Mr. Henry said the expansion project at Silverdale also included the framework for a future additions. Silverdale currently holds slightly more than 700 prisoners.

Alternative sentencing, such as house arrest, for low-risk criminals also freed up some space in the jail, officials said. But space in the jail still is tight, Chief Hart said. As of Thursday morning, the inmate count was 585.

"Our average daily population this year is about 560, which is 100 less than last year. But we're still over capacity," he said. Chief Hart said housing inmates over capacity leads to higher costs and compromises security.

"Any time we're over capacity, it impacts the whole operation," he said. "We are required to prepare more meals. There is more concern about security and safety. There are higher costs in certain areas, such as food service, pharmaceuticals and health care." The chronic overcrowding also put the jail in danger last year of losing its certification, County Mayor Claude Ramsey said. "That's why we got the crowding down in the jail," he said. The reduction in numbers has satisfied the Tennessee Corrections Institute that inspects jails and workhouses, Mr. Ramsey said.

For the last fiscal year, net operating costs for the county jail equaled nearly \$8.9 million, while net operating costs for Silverdale were about \$130,000 less, according to data from County Auditor Bill McGriff's office. Costs at both institutions increased over fiscal 2003.

In fiscal 2004, the per capita inmate cost at Silverdale was \$43.17 a day, and \$51.57 a day at the jail. In fiscal 2003, Silverdale's per capita cost was \$43.56, and the jail's was \$43.38.

Because the number of inmates at the jail decreased, the per capita cost appeared higher in fiscal 2004 than years before, Mr. McGriff said. The jail's costs are fixed and when divided by fewer inmates, appear higher per day, he said.

Barbara Payne, director of Hamilton County Corrections, said the per capita costs at Silverdale and the county jail cannot be compared because the institutions' costs are structured differently. The county contracts with Corrections Corporation of America to manage the Silverdale Detention Center. In an effort to reduce the county's costs, Mr. Ramsey and Ms. Payne renegotiated the contract with CCA in February.

Negotiations led to a cost reduction of \$5 a day for every male inmate in excess of 500 and \$2 a day for every female inmate in excess of 128 at Silverdale. A built-in 3 percent annual increase in the contract also was reduced to 2 percent.

Ms. Payne said the contract negotiations have saved the county more than \$92,000 since February.

Mr. Ramsey said he is satisfied with the new contract and with CCA's management. The county is not looking at further negotiations, he said.

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Staff Photo by Sean McRae Loftin Hamilton County Jail inmates sleep on makeshift beds on the floor of a recreation room at the facility. The numbers of prisoners in the jail are over the limit the facility should house.