

Judge Helped Get Jail More Staffers

By JOHN WILSON Free Press Staff Writer

When a federal judge speaks, people generally pay attention. He can even find a way to add dozens of jailers and other support personnel at the Hamilton County Jail. Sheriff John Cupp maintains that the County Jail has long been dangerously short of staff, but it took a meeting called by U.S. District Court Judge R. Allen Edgar to get the ball rolling to add new jailers. Sheriff Cupp confirmed that he went to a meeting June 30 in Judge Edgar's chambers in which the judge and several other federal officials expressed their concern over the shortage of jailers at the jail. A number of federal prisoners are held at the County Jail, and the federal government contributes some \$600,000 per year toward their upkeep. Those attending the session also included U.S. Magistrate John Powers, U.S. Marshal Supervisor Joe Fowler from Knoxville, and local Marshal Gary Mullins. Mr. Fowler is a former two-term sheriff at Knoxville. Sheriff Cupp said the federal officials expressed great concern about the jail conditions and said they might have to consider moving the federal prisoners elsewhere. Sheriff Cupp, who had a request for 41 additional jail employees turned down by the county last summer during a tight county budget, said Judge Edgar asked him, "Do you want me to go to the County Commission?" He said Magistrate Powers said, "Do you want another federal judge to take over the jail?" The sheriff said Mr. Fowler said the federal concerns all related to understaffing. Mr. Fowler said at the session, "We don't want to remove our prisoners because of convenience, but we will if we have to." Sheriff Cupp said, "The summary of the meeting was that they had helped us as much as they could. They said, 'You are going to have to do something to help the situation.' " The sheriff said he advised the federal officials, "We knew there was a bad problem and we had been documenting it and were looking into it at the time." He said afterward he went back to county officials, including advising them of the comments from Judge Edgar and the other federal officials. Sheriff Cupp said he "spelled everything out" for county officials, including advising exactly how each new employee would be used. The County Commission on Wednesday approved the first wave of new jail personnel -- two counselors, 13 correctional officers and a nurse. The county has privately agreed to add another 13 correctional officers at the first of next year, 10 more at the first of March, and another 10 at the first of May. The cost for the new personnel was put at \$1,189,846 for the 1996-1997 fiscal year. Cost in next year's budget is listed at \$535,685. The expense is \$267,000 for the rest of this fiscal year. Sheriff Cupp said those personnel should provide adequate staffing at the jail through the next five years. Judge Edgar on July 12 received a memorandum from Beth Miller of U.S. Pretrial Services Officers on "complaints voiced by federal defendants housed at the Hamilton County Jail." It addressed complaints from the months of June and July and said "similar complaints have been voiced in the past." Sheriff Cupp said one evening recently he had gone to the sixth floor of the jail and found one officer guarding 97 prisoners. He said the most dangerous inmates are placed on that floor. The jailer was still in his probationary period, he said. The sheriff said he found one jailer guarding 84 prisoners on the fifth floor that night. Sheriff Cupp said, "It's a dangerous situation for the prisoners if anybody gets to the officer. And he's (the jailer) had it."