

Overcrowded Jail Brings Many Challenges

By JAMIE HANCOCK Free Press Staff Writer

The number of crimes being committed in Chattanooga and Hamilton County continues to take a toll on available space at the Hamilton County Jail. "It's crowded because we're arresting people," said Tony Bennett, chief of corrections. "I congratulate city Police Chief Jimmie Dotson and Sheriff John Cupp's patrol division. Both men are crime fighters and I think that's all very positive. Anytime you have an environment that's pro-law enforcement, you'll get overcrowding in your jails." Last Tuesday there were 563 felons housed at the downtown facility for crimes ranging from public intoxication to murder. Of that number, only two were ready to be shipped to a penitentiary. At one point the week before, 620 felons were housed at the jail, which has bed space for 494 inmates. Because of the overpopulation, Mr. Bennett and his staff must stay on their toes. "There's a security risk here. Obviously, when you have more people in a facility that's designed for a smaller number, that increases the anxiety level," said Mr. Bennett. "You run a crowded jail the same way you run an uncrowded jail, by providing the necessities for them." For some time now, in order to accommodate the added inmates, jailers have been placing several mattress pallets on the floor at night. "We're doing the same job today that we do every day. We're handling the inmate population for Hamilton County by making sure they're fed and make bond," said Mr. Bennett. Mr. Bennett's staff, 153 corrections officers, is prepared with a special reaction team to quickly respond to violence or disturbances. "Since I've been here, they haven't responded to a crisis. The best thing to say is hope you never have to use them," Mr. Bennett said. As you enter the chief's office, there are "how-to" books lining the shelves, providing information on gangs, prisoner rules and regulations and security. "I'm a firm believer (that) life is a series of choices. We want the offender to take responsibility for their actions and make better choices in the future," said Mr. Bennett. "We're not talking high-dollar programs that are 'touchy feely' but basic life skills, such as GED, drug and alcohol awareness, anger management to individual finances." What are some of the things Mr. Bennett and his staff are doing to help change the crime situation? "We're looking at how to best use county tax dollars, yet have some return to the public either in reduced recidivism or change of attitude or the behavior of the defendant." Mr. Bennett has a good idea what he's talking about, even though he's been on the sheriff's department payroll for only two years. He worked for jails during his 20-year stint in the Marine Corps and was assigned for six years at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. Mr. Bennett realizes he has a tough row to hoe because of the public's perception of jails and how they are operated. "Most people don't understand the workings of a jail. They go by what they see on television. They want to lock them up and throw away the key, but then they wonder why so many are being locked up," he said. The workings within the system are dynamic, he pointed out. "First, we must protect the public, receive, release and make sure bonds are made and appointments are kept at Erlanger, Fortwood and Moccasin Bend Mental Hospital," Mr. Bennett said. "Of all the things that happen here, the staff that come here every day deserve the praise. It couldn't be done without them. "We make no progress without them because they're the ones that turn the keys and lock the doors." Stress, burnout and low pay are common factors that cause many a jailer to rethink his decision to watch over inmates. As of Jan. 13, 1998, the starting salary for academy graduates assigned to jail is \$16,328. "The pay is low, the hours are long and the job is very stressful on the officers that work it," Mr. Bennett said. During Mr. Bennett's time here, he's had discussions with Sheriff Cupp and County Executive Claude Ramsey about increasing the pay for jailers. No action has been taken on the issue by County Commission members.