

## **Overcrowding fails to fall**

### **Alternative bond program not achieving jail relief**

**By Ginny LaRoe Staff Writer**

Hamilton County's alternative bond program has not significantly eased overcrowding in the jail or paid for itself, according to records provided by the local corrections department.

"We didn't have instant success, but it's going to take a little time to get the program in place," Hamilton County Mayor Claude Ramsey said Monday. "We're working toward that every day."

Eight inmates have been released since the program's inception Feb. 27. Mr. Ramsey said an average of 17 inmates participating at all times is needed for the county to save the \$216,324 the program is expected to cost annually.

Under the program's guidelines, certain nonviolent offenders who cannot afford their bonds are screened by corrections employees, and then a judge reviews the cases to decide if they can be released. The county has spent \$39,504 to operate the program, designed to ease chronic overcrowding at the Hamilton County Jail that led to its December 2005 decertification by the Tennessee Corrections Institute. The program so far has saved \$8,669 in jail costs, according to county corrections officials.

**NOT GIVING UP** Though the county is \$30,835 short of breaking even, Sheriff John Cupp said the program could still be a success.

"It was not developed as a money-saving program," he said. "It was instituted to cut down on population."

The Tennessee Corrections Institute cited in a report on the decertification that inmates were being housed in holding cells for as long as four days until beds became available. The jail's certified capacity is 489, but it rarely has that few inmates, officials have said. The average daily population peaked in September at 684, according to Chief Jim Hart, the county jail administrator.

Inmate population since the implementation of the alternative bond program has averaged 536 a day, according to jail records.

Mr. Ramsey and Sheriff Cupp point to the success of a similar program in Davidson County, Tenn. Officials there said they have had their own alternative bond program since the 1970s.

"When I started working here, I was leery about who I let out because I didn't want it to reflect back on me," said Jim Sadler, program manager for pre-trial services in Davidson County.

Over time, corrections employees and judges become more comfortable with the idea of releasing certain inmates, he said.

**TWO JUDGES BALK** Two Hamilton County General Sessions judges said they do not participate in the program here.

"It's an ambitious program but will have little efficacy in the reduction of jail overcrowding," Judge Bob Moon said Monday.

He and Judge David Bales each said they do not consider an inmate's ability to pay when setting bond. Instead, they use guidelines in Tennessee's Bail Bond Reform Act, which takes into account a person's prior criminal history, work history, family ties and whether the inmate is a danger to the public.

"My main concern is the safety of citizens of Hamilton County," Judge Bales said.

The first inmate released on the county's program was arrested days after being let out of jail, Judge Bales said.

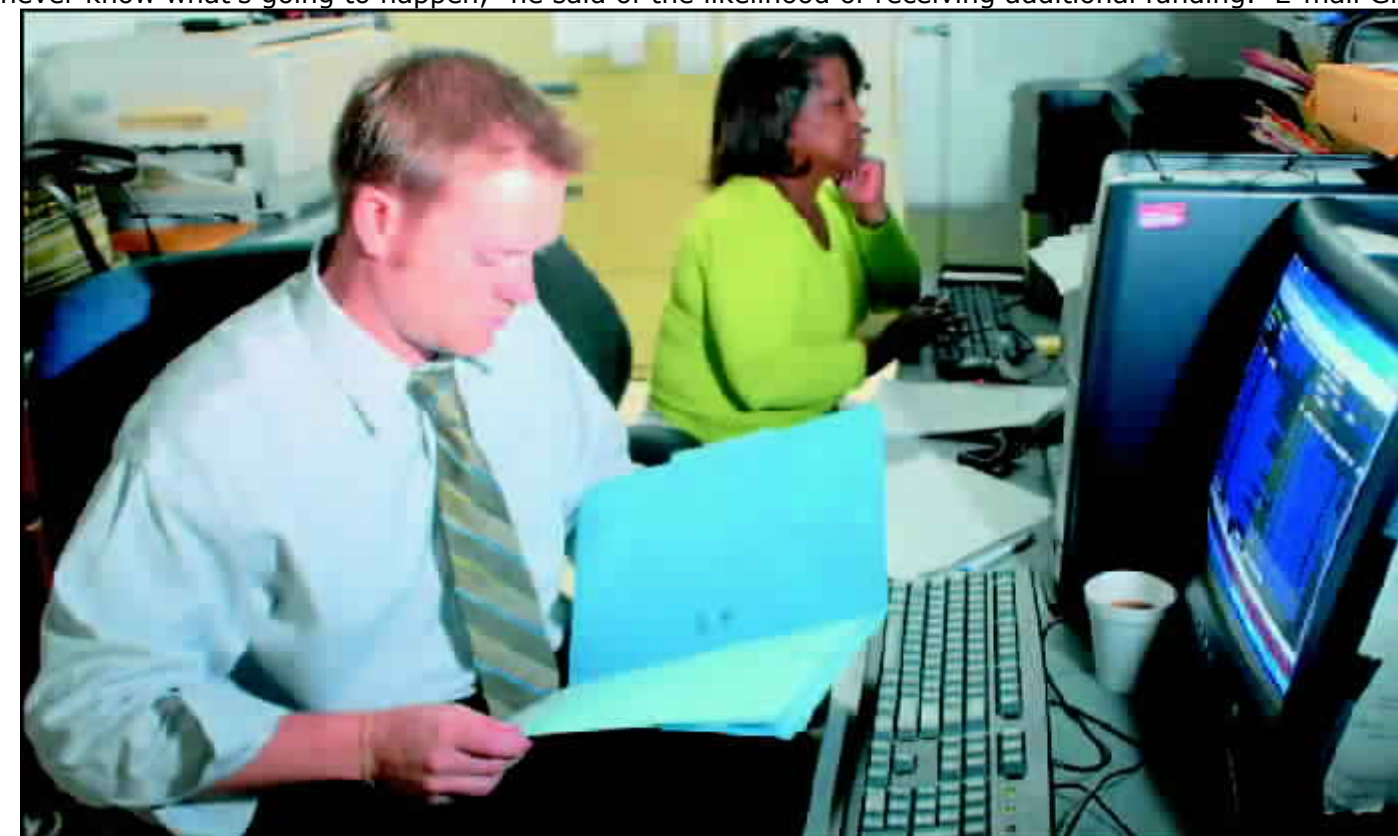
Jason Charles Hall was charged with possession of crack cocaine, registration violation and driving on a suspended license, records show. He was arrested after his release on charges of leaving the scene of an accident and driving on a revoked license.

"A person on crack cocaine is not thinking rationally and will do anything and everything to obtain that next fix of crack cocaine," Judge Bales said.

When Mr. Ramsey proposed the pre-trial program in January, he said the program was the last option before construction of new facilities.

Meanwhile, Sheriff Cupp asked the County Commission on Monday for the money to hire seven additional jail employees.

In his budget request for the next fiscal year, he asked for six records clerks and one counselor, which would cost the county \$272,366 per year in salary and benefits. The sheriff said this would allow currently employed clerks to become corrections officers who oversee inmates. "With no tax increase, you never know what's going to happen," he said of the likelihood of receiving additional funding. E-mail Ginny LaRoe at [glaroe@timesfreepress.com](mailto:glaroe@timesfreepress.com)



Staff Photo by Angela Lewis Intake specialists Jeremy Schultz, left, and Loretta Finley screen inmate records Monday to see if the inmates are eligible for the alternative bond program at the Hamilton County Jail.

■ Departments begin making budget presentations to county officials, B3

**BY THE NUMBERS**

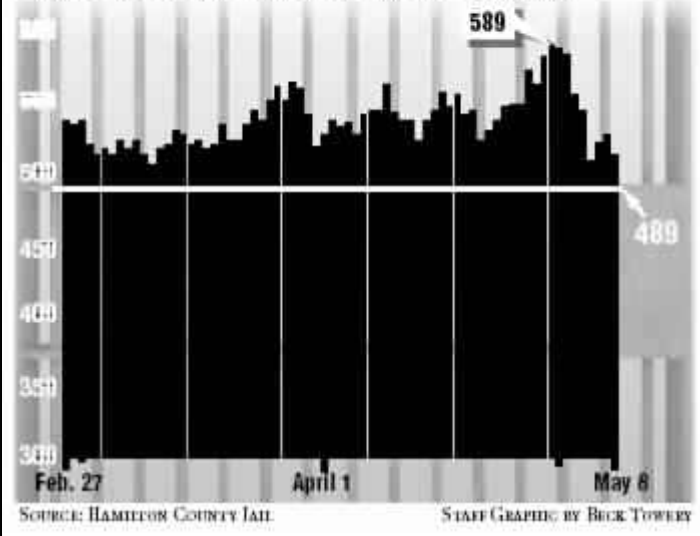
Hamilton County implemented an alternative bond program Feb. 27 to help ease overcrowding in the county's two detention facilities.

- 8 — Inmates now in program
- 17 — Goal for average number of inmates participating
- \$8,669 — Savings in operating costs since Feb. 27
- \$39,504 — Amount spent on program to date
- \$216,324 — Estimated cost to operate program for one year

Source: Hamilton County Corrections Department

**Cramped quarters**

Daily inmate count for the Hamilton County Jail since the start of the alternative bond program on Feb. 27. The facility's population has been above the certified capacity of 489 every day.



Staff Photo by Kathleen Greeson A Hamilton County Sheriff's Department employee moves two prisoners at the Hamilton County Jail in downtown Chattanooga. Officials are looking at measures to ease overcrowding in the jail, which has been decertified.