

Report Says Jailers, Inmates "Threatened"

By **RONNIE MOORE** Staff Writer

The Hamilton County Jail continues to suffer from overcrowding and understaffing to such an extent that the safety of jailers and inmates is threatened, according to the state's latest inspection report. Sheriff John Cupp warned on Wednesday that he believes the state may finally be ready to decertify the jail after years of similar warnings. Sheriff Cupp said no one knows with certainty if state funding at the rate of \$35 a day for state prisoners would be cut or eliminated. "Whether we lose money or not, the issue is safety in the jail," said the sheriff. "We've got to do something," he said. "We've played games with the state long enough. I'm not buying the theory some people have that the state won't do anything." The jail population during the state's Dec. 20 inspection was 517, down dramatically from the October daily average of 586. The inmate population on Wednesday was 513. The jail's rated capacity is 478 inmates, but temporary space has been found for about 45 inmates in the past 18 months. Sheriff Cupp said he will seek a gradual funding increase for about 79 more jailers, but he is having problems keeping the jailers he's already got. In July, the salary for jailers was increased about \$4,500 to \$21,000. "We have worked on things to improve the jail, but you can't improve the personnel staffing situation without getting more personnel," he said. The inspector's concerns mirrored the sheriff's. "It is not unusual for one officer to work his shift alone," the report stated. "The safety of the officer, as well as the inmates is certainly jeopardized and creates a very unsafe working environment." County Executive Claude Ramsey said the county has made "big efforts" to streamline operations and relieve jail overcrowding. "I believe it is working," he said. "Over a longer period of time I think it will improve more." Peggy Sawyer of the Corrections Institute Board of Control conducted the inspection and said in the report that she will re-inspect the jail within 60 days, or around Feb. 20. Copies of the report arrived here on Jan. 21 for Sheriff Cupp, County Executive Ramsey and Jail Chief Jim Hart. Commissioner Jim Vincent, chairman of the blue ribbon panel that has studied the jail and court overcrowding, said he had not seen the report. "I was not aware it was in. As chairman of finance and of corrections, I feel I should have been informed and provided the inspection report," said Commissioner Vincent. Commissioner Vincent said the county needs to make a decision about staffing. "I think we're going to have to increase the jail staffing," he continued. "I think we are making more headway that most counties in reducing the jail population. I believe the jail population will continue to go down with the three magistrates setting bonds at the jail." The report mentions the county's plan to relieve overcrowding of inmates through the hiring of three magistrates to set cash bonds or personal bonds. "The judicial (magistrates) were hired on Nov. 3, 1999 and it is too soon to see if this plan is going to work," the reports continues. Other comments in the inspection report are that "the inmate population must be reduced within 60 days" and "it is recommended that additional staff be hired within 60 days." Chief Hart said the Tennessee Correction Institute will allow the jail to build temporary space for inmates for a maximum of 18 months. "I think it is premature to give a report card on the magistrates," said Chief Hart. "They are releasing some charged with offenses on personal bonds without any cash required. They are also setting some very high bonds on some offenses where the bond was much less under the old system. This impacts my work force in the jail because we have to house prisoners by classification. The setting of a high bond results in a different classification." Ms. Sawyer said after her re-inspection this month that a recommendation will be made along with her findings to the TCI Board of Control. "I have no way of knowing what actions or recommendations the board will make," said Ms. Sawyer. "It would not be appropriate for me to speculate." Grand juries in Hamilton County have noted for years that the jail was unsafe and had severe staffing shortages. Sheriff Cupp said he believes the jail could be decertified within the year. "Some of the conclusions go back to 1986 and can be summed up in two words: understaffed and overcrowded," said Sheriff Cupp. Chief Hart said he's concerned that decertification could make the county more liable if an injury occurs. He said that state guidelines indicate the jail needs a 40 percent increase in manpower. "There is no one who hasn't worked in the jail who can understand how dangerous it is," added Sheriff Cupp. "The number one concern by the team from County Technical Advisory Service at UT is safety."