

Security risks at county jail **STUDY UNCOVERS BROKEN LOCKS, LACK OF MANPOWER**

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Staff Writers

For years, grand juries in Hamilton County have been calling for a new jail, saying the present one is antiquated and needs such upgrades as a mental health wing.

Now a study has uncovered a host of problems ranging from broken locks to a shortage of corrections officers that the report said has staff continually operating in crisis mode.

The findings are included in a 222-page study of the Hamilton County Jail completed by the University of Tennessee County Technical Assistance Service and issued earlier this year. Among the findings:

n On the third floor, where both low-risk and high-profile inmates are housed, some inmates can let themselves out of their cells. Throughout the facility, most of the windows need to be replaced and cannot be secured.

n There typically aren't enough officers present in the six-floor facility built in the mid-1970s. Officers are at risk and there's not always enough manpower to conduct checks for contraband.

n Staffing costs totaled \$61 million over a nine-year period because of the jail's linear design, a configuration that results in more staff being needed to monitor inmates and keep them under control. And those costs will remain unless county commissioners decide to build a new jail that would be less labor intensive.

The report recommends that the sheriff and Hamilton County Commission begin discussing the future of the jail.

But even if the political will and the money to proceed were already in place, the road to a new jail would be long.

"If the commission said today, 'we're going to build a jail,' it'd be five or six years before we stepped foot in it," said Marty Haynes, one of nine Hamilton County commissioners. "If we are going to look at this thing, I would suggest hiring an architect to determine where it should go and what it should be."

Sheriff Jim Hammond, who asked for the study, isn't ready to push for a new jail yet.

"That has to come from the commission, not me," Hammond said.

But he does hope that the CTAS report could at least lead to a feasibility study to lay the groundwork for a new facility.

A HISTORY

OF WAITING

It takes years to get buy-in to build a new jail. The present jail opened in 1976. A campaign to build a new one started a decade before.

Before the current facility, the last jail was built in the 1800s to house 180 inmates. It was about 100 years old before the county was faced with building a new jail, though grand juries began to call for one long before.

"There is no place or means for physical exercise and these men are like caged animals with as many as 20 kept in a single cell block," the grand jury reported at the time.

In 1970, when more than 100 inmates were sleeping on the floor, the deputy chief of the jail was quoted as saying, "We can't keep as close a watch on the prisoners. This situation has doubled the amount of work on the jailers."

That same year there were a couple of mass escapes. In all, 14 inmates managed to break loose. With the jail at high capacity, there also were problems with sanitation.

Finally, amid an accumulation of problems and recognition that the old jail was wholly inadequate, the present jail was opened in 1976. Archives show that at the time of its construction, the jail had a price tag of \$8 million. Buildings were demolished and relocated to make new room for the jail on Walnut Street. Hamilton County Judge Chester Frost touted the project, saying it would house the entire criminal justice system including courts and the attorney general's staff. He said it should serve the county's needs "possibly for the next 75 years."

A year later, the jail was criticized because the facility's design did not meet state and federal standards.

Today, though the facility has been maintained and renovated throughout its 36 years, it is outdated and shows signs of wear. For every year of use, a jail ages 3.5 years, the study states. That puts the working age of the current facility at 126 years.

The building has constant plumbing and electrical problems, the study states. The elevators routinely break down.

"We realize there will be a need for a new jail in time ..." said Larry Henry, also a Hamilton County commissioner. "I just really don't see anything on the immediate horizon for consideration to build a new jail."

Jim Hart, who was administrator at the Hamilton County Jail from 1997 to 2007, conducted the study.

"I think the county does a lot of good things, but at some point it's time to start some serious discussion about the future because it takes a period of time from the decision of, 'We need to build,' to the actual completion of that," he said.

INSPECTIONS

AND COMPLIANCE

For the past 10 years, the jail routinely has flunked the state's first round of inspections except for a couple of times, according to records requested by the Times Free Press. The facility has passed upon reinspection.

This year the jail initially failed to meet standards because of filth on the floors and in the shower areas. Inmates had a limited amount of required recreation time and jailers performed inadequate security checks.

"The facilities classification process is increasingly difficult to achieve due to the population near or above capacity levels," wrote the state inspector, Denise Messer, a detention facility specialist. "There has been a rise in use of force and critical incidents at the facility in the past three years that can be attributed to the lack of sufficient staff for the multi-level, advance aged facility."

Hammond said the jail is still in compliance.

"We're not [out of compliance.] It's just a lot of things have reached their usable life span. Locks are failing and [metal] ceilings have to be rewelded and doors that have to be fixed — in the long run, you would find it much more efficient to build a new jail," he said.

A year ago Hammond said in an interview that the jail was adequately staffed and that administrators were examining overtime in an effort to reduce it.

In an interview Friday, Hammond said, "I guess my concern is keeping enough manpower on each floor to deal with the officer-to-prisoner ratio. We're certified for 514 [inmates]. We exceed that daily."

Inmate totals often climb to 550 to 560 daily, he said. The jail has been overcrowded for the past decade, the study states.

Meanwhile, during shifts, many jail officers get pulled to do mental health transports and other extra duties.

Hart wrote, "We concluded that when the jail is not adequately staffed, the county is exposed to an increased level of risk."

Commissioners have other costs and building projects to consider, though.

"I'd much rather build schools than a jail, and we've got plenty of other infrastructure needs," Henry said. "I'm afraid the sheriff 's just going to have to make do with what he has in terms of the jail."

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations in the study include:

- Get a better handle on the number of employees who take off work. When an employee calls in, it's deducted from vacation. High overtime hours correspond to amount of time off.
- Examine video visitation to reduce manpower used at the jail. Proposals from companies were just submitted, according to the sheriff.
- Eliminate the practice of using corrections officers to transport citizens in the community to mental health facilities.
- Stop assigning corrections officers to nonjail positions.
- The sheriff and Hamilton County Commission should begin a serious discussion about the future of the county jail.

Source: Jail and Staffing Assessment

NEW JAIL CHIEF

In recent years, there's been high turnover in the chief position at the Hamilton County Jail. A new corrections chief has been selected after a nationwide search. Pending a background check, physical exam and psychological evaluation, Marion Joseph Fowler, who is deputy warden at Ellsworth State Prison, in Ellsworth, Kan., is scheduled to start in early November, Sheriff Jim Hammond said.