

Short staff, overcrowding hurt local jail security **Inmates sleep in shower stalls at Hamilton facility**

BY ELLIS SMITH

STAFF WRITER

For the second time this year, the overcrowded Hamilton County Jail failed to meet minimum standards because of low staffing levels, but the state will consider granting it conditional certification when local officials present their plan for a longterm fix next week in Nashville.

The jail has routinely flunked inspections for the past 10 years. In September, inspectors again found the "antiquated facility" downtown did not meet Tennessee's minimum standards for staff and inmate security.

"Staffing levels are low and security for staff and inmates could be compromised," inspectors wrote in their report.

The findings echo a 2013 report from the University of Tennessee's County Technical Assistance Service, which recommended 55 new positions beyond the current staff of 159. Hamilton County's elected officials have yet to fully fund the recommended staff level.

"Nobody cares until it's their mom, their dad, their brother, their sister, their son or their daughter," said Joe Fowler, deputy chief of corrections for the jail. "Sometimes, innocent people are put in jail. When that person is in jail, do you want that person to be able to brush their teeth, take a shower and be warm?"

The 2013 UT report found inmates could let themselves out of their cells, windows could not be secured, and county employees working at the 1970s-era facility were at risk.

This year, inmates were being housed in the booking area showers, which meant other inmates could not use them. The booking area itself contained "excessive items and contraband" on the walls, ceilings and floors.

Inventories of supplies and records documenting routine security functions were nowhere to be found, and staffing levels were "insufficient to provide at all times the performance of functions relating to the security, custody and supervision of inmates as needed to operate the facility in conformance with [Tennessee] standards," according to an inspection report.

There was no documentation of inmate phone calls, nor was there any documentation to verify that inmates were being personally observed at least once every hour or even on an irregular schedule.

Some of those issues have been corrected, in part due to new technology such as video visitation and radio frequency tracking of inmates, but Fowler said security would likely remain a concern until county officials either put up money to hire more staff or build a newer, more efficient jail

— a project that could take years, even if officials gave it the go-ahead right away.

The county jail before this one dated back to the 1800s, and it took a decade of campaigning to get the replacement built in 1976. However, it was declared obsolete about a year after it opened because it did not meet state and federal standards.

Yet another study that could include plans for a replacement jail is being put together by the PFM consulting group and may be complete in December, officials said, but there's no guarantee officials will act on the group's recommendations.

Hamilton County Mayor Jim Coppinger said in June he wanted to sell the county's Silverdale facility to Corrections Corporation of America, which would in turn build and operate a new jail replacing the one downtown, but that announcement ignited what he called "a firestorm."

The American Civil Liberties Union blasted his plan, saying evidence of cost savings at private jails was "mixed at best," that private prisons are accountable to shareholders, not taxpayers.

Sheriff Jim Hammond fired off a statement saying the jail was not being sold, and the future careers of his staff in the jail was non-negotiable.

In the meantime, state inspectors in September "strongly recommended" that county officials pay for enough corrections officers to staff the facility and ensure it complies with state law, and also "strongly recommended" that Coppinger, the Hamilton County Commission and Hammond form a partnership to come up with a realistic plan.

Hammond asked earlier in 2015 for a \$4 million increase to his \$30 million budget, in part to hire 14 new jailers.

"I just want you to know that this ship is listing," he told the County Commission. "And it only gets worse year after year."

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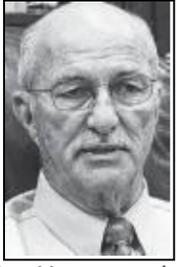


STAFF FILE PHOTO BY DAN HENRY

An inmate and his visitor converse during a scheduled visitation at the Hamilton County Jail in downtown Chattanooga in this August photo.

Online

See the September jail
Inspection report at
www.timesfreepress.com



Jim Hammond