Ideas to cut jail overcrowding given
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Study draft suggests Greene County follow procedures used in juvenile detention center.

Ryan Slight, News-Leader

A draft of a new study suggests an answer to Greene County Jail's overcrowding lies with the county's juvenile detention center's procedures.

In its initial review of Greene County's criminal justice system released last week, a California firm praised the juvenile center's admission and detention policies implemented in 2001 that helped cut the facility's average daily population in half.

"The experience of the Greene County Juvenile Detention Center offers a microcosm of what can be done with the adult criminal justice system," said a preliminary report prepared by the Berkeley, Calif.-based Institute for Law and Policy Planning.

"Although the juvenile justice system is a smaller and more self-contained system, the development of systemwide policies, designed to minimize the use of the justice system's most scarce resources, can lead to control of the jail's population and improve accountability," the report said.

The firm suggested similar policies to ration use of the adult jail, which surpassed capacity in December despite being designed to accommodate housing needs for at least the next decade. The jail opened in 2001.

"If they didn't have a toll on the Golden Gate Bridge, I couldn't drive around," said ILPP executive director Alan Kalmanoff.

"You've got to ration certain facilities in this world in order to use them. If everybody goes into the jail, at some point the jail closes."

In hopes of finding a more efficient way to house inmates, Greene County officials granted ILPP a $190,000 contract to take a comprehensive look at the criminal justice system.

The firm's initial document suggested that capacity fueled demand when Greene County's new jail opened -- a case of "if you build it, they will come."

Greene County experienced an increase in the number of jail admissions and the average incarceration length, which contributed to the facility's overcrowding, the draft said.

The draft's suggestions included creating better arrest standards to help law enforcement officers determine who should be cited and released instead of taken to the jail for booking.

"By developing concise arrest standards, including uniform arrest standards to be used by all law enforcement agencies operating within the county, the use of citation releases in the field and later at the jail can be increased, thus minimizing or reducing the number of 'admissions' into the jail," the draft said.

Kalmanoff released the preliminary draft to county officials on Tuesday. Officials may notify him of corrections to the document by March 17. The final report is expected in mid-April.

Presiding Commissioner Dave Coonrod felt it was too premature to speak on aspects of the initial report.

"It's a draft. We don't know what will be the same in the final report," he said.

Kalmanoff urged officials last week not to comment on the draft before reviewing it for inaccuracies. The document is subject to change.

"If somebody pulled something out of that draft and made news out of that, it might actually be news about an inaccuracy," he said. "I've tried to stress that. ... This is a work in progress."

The final copy may significantly differ from the version commissioners are reviewing. It will include an action plan that provides all recommendations in a prioritized schedule, with pros, cons, costs and impacts identified.

ILPP's executive director and a staff of criminal justice professionals visited Greene County last year to observe how its agencies operated in the criminal justice system, including law enforcement agencies, the prosecutor's office, the public defender's office, the courts, adult detention and probation, justice information systems and the juvenile system.

The draft report said current operations at juvenile center demonstrate the value of the National Institute of Corrections' Planning for the Opening of New Institutions (PONI) program that the center utilized.

PONI is a weeklong training program designed to assist different agencies in planning and designing correctional facilities.

According to the draft, the center's 24-bed facility had a daily population that routinely exceeded its capacity. Staff members implemented new policies in April 2001 after attending the PONI program in Colorado, and the facility's average daily population declined to about 10 in January.

Family Court Judge Thomas Mountjoy said the juvenile system also benefited from having him assigned to handle juvenile cases full time in addition to his family cases. Juvenile cases had not had a sole full-time judge before.

The decrease in detention was noticeable soon after the changes, Mountjoy said.

"We were able to move people through the court quicker," he said.

The judge had been concerned that not only did the juvenile center have a maximum number of detainees, but numerous individuals were held for an excess of days.

Under the system in place now, each juvenile accepted for detention must get approval from a "gatekeeper" -- a chief probation officer or designee -- who must ensure all other reasonable options or alternatives are considered before a youth's detention, the draft said.

Police must contact the facility and receive booking approval before delivering a minor to the center, it said.

The new system also provided new criteria to score the youths in certain risk areas, Mountjoy said. Those include current legal status, protection of the juvenile, protection of person or property of others, risk of fleeing or being removed by the Juvenile Court, adjustment on community supervision and fugitive from another jurisdiction, according to the draft.

"They are much the same issues a judge would study for bond in an adult case," Mountjoy said.

In addition, the juveniles have their detention status reviewed every 30 days, the draft said.

"These policy changes have been quite successful in containing the detention center population," the draft said.