

Study Offers Solutions To Knox Jail Overcrowding

Knoxville (WVLT) – Knox County needs to change who it puts in jail and for how long. That's according to an outside consultant's assessment of the county's crowding problem.

Volunteer TV's Mike McCarthy has been reviewing the report.

Jail crowding has been a problem since the 1970s, in fact, when the current downtown jail opened in 1976, there already were more inmates than beds from day one.

And a new report from the institute for law and policy planning has some suggestions to fix that.

Too many inmates, not enough beds, it's an on-going problem for Knox County.

"When you're no longer scared to go to jail, then we've lost a stick on you. So I think it's worth looking at other ways," says District Attorney Randy Nichols.

Friday morning the county heard "other ways" in the latest of a long-running history of jail crowding assessments.

The Knox County Sheriff's Office says as of Friday morning's headcount, the county detention center's home to 801 inmates. That's 125 more bodies than it was built to hold.

But Sheriff J.J. Jones says the solutions' no secret. "We need a downtown intake center to get these people in and out so we don't have to transport them all the way across town, 36 miles roundtrip."

A road trip he says cost you hundreds of thousands of dollars each year.

And the assessment's top recommendation, just that, a downtown intake center.

It also recommends creating a threat matrix that would judge which inmates pose the least risk of re-offending and let them out early or just not jail them at all.

Another suggestion, put a 85% capacity limit on the jail.

"I'll stack them up like wood," Sheriff Jones says. "We're not going to turn 309 people loose on this community, absolutely not as long as I'm sheriff."

Another option, have criminals pay for their crimes, literally. The report suggest inmates pay for jail alternatives like half-way homes.

"These people who are stealing things aren't able to pay in the first place," Sheriff Jones argues. "So how are they going to make them make restitution?"

Regardless, Nichols says the county needs a system that punishes criminals, not taxpayers. "Now if someone gets lost in the wash in that, then let it be those that continue to violate the law."

Besides the detention center, the county also has a downtown jail for maximum security inmates, but that has a federal capacity cap of 215 inmates.

If it goes beyond that, the county faces fines.

The mayor's office paid \$50,000 for this latest assessment.