

Study critical of Somerset jail

BY KECIA BAL

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SOMERSET — Though the Somerset County Jail's average population now is less than half the figure of a year ago, the root sources of jail overcrowding have yet to be addressed, an outside expert has concluded.

An in-depth evaluation of the county's criminal justice system highlights 80 recommendations to ease the overcrowding and create a more efficient system overall with permanent solutions.

"The jail is very troublesome in this county," said Alan Kalmanoff, director for the Institute for Law and Policy Planning in Berkeley, Calif. The institute conducted the detailed study with a \$100,000 grant from the state Commission on Crime and Delinquency and a \$37,000 county match.

County officials reviewed a draft form of the study Wednesday evening.

Kalmanoff said the jail's design, along with staff policy, procedure and training, are problematic.

"The problem, I feel, is that it's still crowded," he said, adding that 63 percent of prisoners are considered minimum security.

Many of them could be on work release or electronic monitoring, he said.

President Judge John Cascio, who chairs the newly formed criminal justice advisory board, agreed changes are in order.

"There are larger issues than (jail overcrowding)," he said.

"We certainly need to have more effective management at certain levels of the process."

One recommendation that Kalmanoff mentioned repeatedly was creating a Web-based court calendar that all law-enforcement agencies can access.

"There needs to be a way everybody knows what's going on," he said.

He also said a new management position to oversee the criminal justice system would make sense.

Some of the recommendations, Kalmanoff said, are simple, such as creating a cap on the number of inmates allowed at the jail and implementing a procedure for immediately reducing the population if it reaches the limit.

Most of all, he said, the county needs a strong advisory board of aggressive decision-makers who will execute change.

“We need gatekeepers to steer the ship,” he said. “Change is harder in a small community.”

County Commissioner Pam Tokar-Ickes said the results, almost overwhelming in scope, can be a positive tool for improvement.

“The question is, what do we do with it next,” she said.