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Camden County Jail population steadily declines

By James Osborne

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The number of inmates housed at the Camden County Jail has decreased steadily over the last year, as the county criminal justice system continues to streamline its court operations.

From an average daily population of 1,702 in February 2009, that figure dropped to 1,421 through the end of this February, according to data provided by Camden County.

What had been viewed as a potential blip - jail populations fluctuate frequently and drastically - is now viewed as evidence that the changes made to the system are taking hold.

"We're happy to see there's been some decline," said Camden County Superior Court Judge Thomas Brown, who oversees the criminal division. "Through some adjustments, we've been bringing in more cases, to try and resolve them faster and keep cases flowing. You don't want to see people languishing."

The now-yearlong effort to reduce the jail population follows a class-action lawsuit filed by a former inmate over jail overcrowding. As well, the rising cost of running the facility has drawn the scrutiny of Camden County freeholders, who in December announced they planned to bring in a corrections company.

The exact form privatization would take - the handing over of the entire jail or the creation of a private drug-treatment facility for low-level offenders - remains undecided as officials await a final report from consultants before they go out for bids, said county spokeswoman Joyce Gabriel.

But for now, the priority remains bringing down the population as close as possible to its official capacity of 1,267 prisoners.

"Based on the serious violent crime that makes up the majority of the criminals in the jail, I don't believe we can" get to capacity, said Gladys Rodriguez, Camden County first assistant prosecutor. "We are getting to one of the lowest numbers we've ever had, and we're looking at numbers going back 10 years."

In interviews Friday, Brown and Rodriguez outlined a broad change involving prosecutors, public defenders, private attorneys, jail officials, and the entire judicial system to root out inefficiencies.

People facing prison sentences are given priority in court dates, to get those convicted out of the jail and into the state prison where they will serve their time. Home-monitoring systems and work release programs are increasingly being used as an alternative to jail time for lower-level offenders. And the bail-review process has adjusted to work with people with no criminal history and low flight risk.

"Those cases that can hit the streets would not spend any additional time in jail," Brown said, "of course, making sure due-process rights are observed and the safety of the community."

In addition, the jail's video court system, in which municipal judges arraign inmates via video conference, has been expanded from one monitor to three. Inmates who might have sat in the jail for days awaiting arraignment can now be admitted, arraigned outside their cell, and released from the jail the same day.

Rob Parker, a corrections officer and president of Policemen's Benevolent Association Local 351, the union representing the corrections officers, said there was a palpable shift in the flow of inmates through the jail.

"They're shipping them out pretty fast," he said. "The population is definitely going down. It's more than a blip."

While the future of the jail remains unclear, county officials are putting money into making the existing system more efficient.

Following a court agreement in the class-action suit, the county last year hired a criminal justice consultant, St. Petersburg, Fla.-based Luminosity Solutions, to work with local agencies.

In a written statement Friday, Camden County Freeholder Director Louis Cappelli Jr. credited local officials for the population decrease.

"It has been their efforts to streamline the criminal justice process which have resulted in this efficiency," he said.

The consultant has already paid off, Rodriguez said. Through a new interdepartmental information system, officials from the courts and Prosecutor's Office will soon have direct access to jail data they can use to gauge how the system is working.

"If I want to find out, say, how many people are in jail with \$25,000 or less in bail? What are the charges?" she said. "Before, I don't think there was a way. I venture to say it would have taken days or weeks."

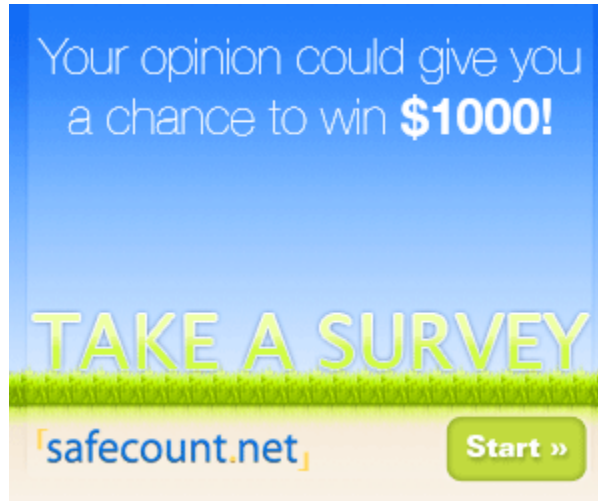
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