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Summit County corrects jail overcrowding

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When Summit County opened its new jail nearly 20 years ago, there was an immediate problem: overcrowding.

Within five years, an addition was built.

Even then, the gym had to be filled with cots and converted into a makeshift cell to house an increasing number of inmates.

A facility designed to handle 670 saw its population balloon to near 800 sometimes.

Tensions ran high. Supplies ran out. Confrontations were frequent. Political and public criticism over the dangerous housing and working conditions was heavy.

But today — just a few years removed from being assailed as an example of inefficiency — the county is serving as a national role model for other communities on how to relieve crowding.

The correctional facility is operating under capacity thanks to a variety of reforms, including an improved pretrial services program, the hiring of a jail population manager, better collaboration within the justice system and alternative sentencing programs.

Sheriff Drew Alexander and Common Pleas Judge Elinore Marsh Stormer — both driving forces behind the reforms — also have served as experts at conferences on how the county overcame the long-standing problem.

"They are to be commended for what they've done in Summit County," said Butch Hunyadi, chief of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction's Bureau of Adult Detention. "You can take pride in the fact that the county as a whole has done a tremendous job at putting criminal justice as a priority."

The history

Jail crowding has been a recurring problem, dating back to 1973, when an inmate in the former jail in downtown Akron filed a lawsuit complaining about the conditions.

The county eventually responded to a federal consent order by building a \$26 million jail on East Crosier Street in Akron. Five years later, the county spent another \$9 million on an addition and started to double-bunk cells.

Despite the new wing and the county spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on consultants and studies, the crowding problem remained. At one point, police stopped hauling prostitutes to the jail because there was no room.

"We were getting nowhere," said Alexander, who was elected in 2000. "Our fear when we first came in was how long will it be before the officers wave the white flag and say, 'We can't beat them.' "

Solutions

The only solution, many thought, was building a bigger, costlier jail.

In 2006, though, the county brought in justice consultant Marie VanNostrand of Luminosity Inc. in St. Petersburg, Fla. She helped criminal justice leaders identify flaws in the system that could be corrected.

One such weakness was simple: moving paperwork faster.

For example, a judicial order to release an inmate didn't have to sit for hours, or even days, before being forwarded along the chain of command to the jail.

The quicker the paperwork moved, the sooner the inmate was released.

The county also improved its pretrial services program, which helps determine if people waiting for trial need to be in jail or if they can be freed pending their next court hearing.

Before, the attitude was that anyone sent to jail deserved to sit there. Now, people identified as low, and even medium, risk might be released, freeing up space for more serious offenders.

Some offenders also might end up at the 150-bed, minimum-security Glenwood Jail in Akron.

"The big fear, of course, initially was that all these people would be let out and criminals would commit more crimes and that really has not

happened," Stormer said.

In addition to using alternative sentencing programs, the county hired a jail population manager who identifies potential problems before they arise and coordinates the response.

"We work as one system now instead of separate entities," said Diane Kovack, the jail population administrator.

The changes have paid off.

"Summit County may not know how phenomenally successful they were, but it's certainly recognized in the national community," VanNostrand said.

Improvement

And it's not that fewer people are going to jail.

In fact, more people are being processed through there than ever. In 1999, jail officials had 11,835 bookings, compared with 14,869 last year.

The difference is their stay is shorter — about 20 days before compared with about 15 days now. With the cost of housing an inmate at \$116 per day, the county also is saving money, Alexander said.

The change within the jail has been dramatic.

Before, jail officials weren't afraid only of inmates taking out their frustrations on staff members but on other inmates as well. They prayed that there'd be no escalating violence.

"There's an edge in the building when you're overcrowded like that," said Sgt. Jack Giordano, who has worked at the facility since 1991. "The jail takes on a different flavor. It pushes that tense environment, pushes it through the roof."

The working conditions have improved, he said, as the population has decreased.

"It's a lot easier to provide the services we are meant to provide," Giordano said.

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