

Friday, December 8, 2017

Letter from the Chair

Dear Mayor Venable and Members of the Sullivan County Commission:

Today, more than 700 of our neighbors are behind bars in the Sullivan County Jail. This number of inmates has never been higher in our history and represents the highest rate of incarceration in our history as well.

One result of this overcrowding is that Sullivan County has been under active scrutiny by the Tennessee Corrections Institute (TCI) since 2014. During that time, the County Corrections Partnership Committee (CCPC), initiated at the direction of Mayor Richard Venable, has collectively spent hundreds of hours in a painstaking examination of the current jail, together with its present and future needs. The work of the committee has included ongoing consultations with a wide range of criminal justice leaders, such as Sullivan County Sheriff Wayne Anderson, a member of our committee, as well as Sullivan County Attorney Dan Street, District Attorney Barry Staubus and Sullivan County's Criminal Court Judges, among others.

While public opinions abound on what to do about jail overcrowding, ascertaining the feasible options for an action plan have proven as elusive as they are expensive. To that end, the CCPC voted unanimously in late October to recommend hiring an outside expert to develop a "Master Plan" for the entire Jail Campus, taking into account both a response to the current overcrowding crisis, as well as a plan to address anticipated future growth. That recommendation, together with our final report, is now in your hands.

Thank you, Mayor Venable and Members of the Sullivan County Commission for your ongoing support and interest in our work, and for providing the County Corrections Partnership Committee the opportunity to serve our fellow citizens in this important capacity.

Respectfully submitted,

Wally Boyd
Chairman, County Corrections Partnership Committee

Final Report: Sullivan County Corrections Partnership Committee

The chronic overcrowding of Sullivan County's Jail has reached what Sullivan County District Attorney Barry Staubus recently described to the members of the County Corrections Partnership Committee (CCPC) as "crisis" proportions. Echoing those comments, Sullivan County Criminal Court Judge James Goodwin, at that same meeting, warned that a host of factors -- overcrowding chief among them -- had achieved "critical mass" and urgently needed to be addressed. The health and safety of prisoners and guards alike, both men emphasized, were being endangered on a daily basis. D.A. Staubus also spoke of the ongoing liability issues inherent in such chronic overcrowding (as well as the considerable costs to Sullivan County taxpayers should legal action result).

In an aging facility designed to accommodate, at best, 619 people, a daily average of more than 730 prisoners now reside in the Sullivan County Jail, with periodic surges on some recent weekends that have come perilously close to 900 inmates. Indeed, for the past several months, several nonviolent misdemeanor offenders, already sentenced to serve their time on weekends, have actually been turned away, solely because there was no way to accommodate them.

With the exception of a few statistical "hiccups," the trend line in the Sullivan County Jail population over the past two decades has been inexorably upward. The numbers tell the story:

JAIL POPULATION OVERVIEW 1998-2017

YEARLY AVERAGE	2008 - 630
1998 - 431	2009 - 636
1999 - 478	2010 - 556
2000 - 461	2011 - 649
2001 - 422	2012 - 683
2002 - 492	2013 - 739
2003 - 460	2014 - 721
2004 - 521	2015 - 698
2005 - 562	2016 - 665
2006 - 601	2017 -732 *{9 MONTH AVERAGE}
2007 - 624	(Source: Sullivan County Sheriff's Department)

Why The Surge In Sullivan's Jail Population?

Even the most cursory look at census data shows that the meteoric rise in Sullivan County's Jail population is not a function of demographic changes occurring within the county itself. From 1998 to the present time, the growth in the general population of Sullivan County has gone from 153,048 to 156,667. That's an increase of just 2.3 percent. If the jail population had kept pace with the modest increase in the general population, we would have expected to see a daily increase of just 10 prisoners over the past 19 years – from 431 to 441. Instead, the jail population has – there is no other word for it – *exploded* over the last two decades, soaring an incredible 69.89 percent – from 431 prisoners in 1998 to 732 in 2017. Worse yet, if this same trend continues over the next 19 years, the average daily population of the Sullivan County Jail would be 1,243 inmates by 2036. Another way to think of it: If the current population of Sullivan County had risen as rapidly as the jail population, the current census would be 260,013 residents.

Clearly, the explosive growth of the Sullivan County Jail has not been driven by a similar increase in the general population. Obviously, a change in culture has occurred during this period. Members of the Law Enforcement community are unanimous in their opinion that the incredible spike in criminal activity and, consequently, the huge jump in jail population is attributable to drug activity, either directly or indirectly. These sources were also in agreement that no one saw such a sea-change in criminal behavior coming.

Challenging Public Perceptions:

In researching the jail overcrowding issue, the Committee found that public perceptions of the complexion of the inmate population were often at odds with reality. For example, most members of the public are of the belief that the majority of those incarcerated in the Blountville facility are there for minor infractions of the law. Still others were unaware of the extraordinary growth in female prisoners.

Of the latter belief, the Committee discovered that one of the reasons for the unexpected increase in the local jail population is the extraordinary rise in female prisoners. When the current Sullivan County Jail opened 31 years ago, it had the capacity to hold up to 28 women. On September 29 of this year, women accounted for 230 of the total inmates in the jail. That represents a staggering 721 % spike in the female inmate population. That unprecedented rise in women prisoners has been fueled largely by convictions for a variety of drug offenses and shoplifting (to support an underlying drug addiction).

The other main source of overcrowding appears to be the pretrial felon population, which accounts for approximately 60 % of all inmates. These are inmates accused of serious crimes who either cannot make bond or for whom bond is not available. Neither are they

eligible for trustee status or participation in any community service. Many, if not most, of this group are repeat offenders jailed on charges that already include violation of probation. As D.A. Staubus and Judge Goodwin told the committee, the widely held perception that the Sullivan County Jail primarily houses inmates whose crimes are minor in nature is simply incorrect.

“Absolutely no one is in jail for failure to pay fines or court costs,” Judge Goodwin told the committee. “We’re talking serious crimes here and many of them repeat offenders as well,” Judge Goodwin explained.

“It comes down to a matter of public safety” Judge Goodwin continued. “Does the public want someone out on bond if the record indicates he’s likely to commit the same offense while awaiting trial? I think the answer to that is obvious.”

Sullivan County’s jail overcrowding problem, while chronic and worsening, is scarcely unique. Of the 95 counties in the state, data from the Tennessee Department of Corrections shows more than half meet the definition of “overcrowded,” and approximately a dozen more are extremely close to capacity.

Clearly, many of the solutions to Sullivan County’s jail overcrowding lie with local citizens and their elected officials. Still others may require remedies on the state level, and perhaps, even the federal level.

While the changes that have caused the local jail population here to soar are complex, and defy easy answers, they need to be recognized and publicly discussed. Only in this way can a consensus be found for moving forward.

Identifying the changes in culture that are leading to more criminal convictions, such as increased drug abuse, and finding solutions to these changes, is beyond the scope of this report and this committee.

However, it appears obvious that the pervasive drug culture in our midst demands serious attention in its own right. The Committee recommends that the Sullivan County Commission continue to seek ways to punish offenders – especially nonviolent offenders – in ways that do not require traditional incarceration. This would include working with state lawmakers, local judges and law enforcement staff in a common effort to positively address and change this behavior before it results in a jail sentence.

In the meantime, however, the continued and chronic overcrowding of the Sullivan County Jail is an ongoing threat to the safety of jail staff and inmates alike and must be

corrected in order to retain certification from the State of Tennessee. Failing to do so is simply not an option.

Our community has authorized three major studies that have confirmed our current crises and projected our needs for the next 20 years. We have studied how other Tennessee jails faced with overcrowding have resolved their problems.

Recommendations:

While the gathering and study of data has been lengthy and tedious, it is apparent that an expansion of our present facility is the best solution.

The Committee recommends an immediate expansion of the current Sullivan County Jail to a capacity of 1,000 inmates, with an option to expand to 1,250 inmates.

- * New infrastructure to support the expansion must be designed including a new kitchen and laundry and new medical facilities to provide physical and mental services
- * New booking area to support larger populations
- * Utilize current facilities

List: Member List of the County Corrections Partnership Committee (CCPC)