



Officials work to ease jail crowding

By [STEPHANIE KISZCZAK](#)

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of two parts on crowding conditions at the Madison County Jail and measures being taken to keep inmate cases moving.

EDWARDSVILLE — With a population that changes daily, the Madison County Jail is “big business,” the sheriff says.

The jail has seen prisoner bookings increase nearly every year since 1991. In 1991, there were 3,767 prisoners. Some 6,637 prisoners did time in 1997. Ten years later, the number reached 8,410 — a 1,773-person

increase. The jail's highest number of bookings was in 2003, with 9,031 prisoners.

As of about 9 a.m. Friday, the jail population hovered at 251 — a number considered safe. However, the census had reached 270 prisoners just two days before.

“We've got room for more drunks, more abusers,” Madison County Sheriff Robert J. Hertz said Friday. “The vacancy sign is up at the jail.”

The jail, which has a maximum capacity of 306 prisoners, sometimes accommodates more prisoners than it can handle — and more than allowed by the Illinois Department of Corrections, which oversees jail conditions.

“(The DOC) expects you to have room for these people — they don't want people sleeping on the floor,” Hertz said.

The increase in prisoners usually occurs during the summer months, particularly July and August, when there are only one or two jury weeks instead of the usual three.

“Seven days in August we were over capacity,” he said. “That always creates a concern, ‘Is (the jail) big enough?’ but we work through it.”

Cramped quarters

One reason for packed jail cells is the success of local law enforcement catching criminals and putting them behind bars. Another contribution to tight quarters is when prisoners with medical or mental health needs are arrested and temporarily housed at the jail.

“We may hold a prisoner because they are waiting for treatment at a facility,” Associate Judge Richard L. Tognarelli said. “The jail has to hold those types of people until there is a hospital bed or treatment spot (available).”

When the jail population nears capacity, various sectors are called upon to address the issue. Hertz, Chief Judge Ann Callis, Madison County State's Attorney William A. Mudge and Madison County Board Chairman Alan J. Dunstan have met several times to discuss the jail being overcrowded. There has been talk of adding another wing to the jail, something Dunstan sees as inevitable, but officials have found ways to curb the population problem — at least for now.

Cramped quarters

Last year, Callis appointed Associate Judge Janet Heflin to serve as a jail liaison, or middleman between the jail and the courts.

"I think it's working out well because it's more immediate communication," she said.

Callis has since appointed Tognarelli to take over the position, which he started Sept. 1, 2007. He describes liaison responsibilities as "population control."

"I'm here in case there's a problem," he said. "It makes it easier for both sides, for the judges and the jail."

Madison County judges receive a jail census daily, which lists the population, prisoners' names and charges. They look for older cases, with less serious crimes.

"We try to review those, some of the older cases, get them out first," Tognarelli said. "What we try to do is keep a handle on those with less serious offenses. Occasionally, there might be somebody that slipped through the cracks."

Such offenses include traffic violations, like driving while license revoked, and misdemeanor offenses. Although prisoners doing time for more serious crimes, like aggravated battery or murder, may have been at the jail longer, they are not considered.

Full speed ahead

As the number of prisoner bookings increases, officials within the court system shift into what Hertz calls "high gear."

Madison County Public Defender John Rekowski said trials usually aren't what moves cases forward.

"It isn't the trials that get people out of jail," he said. "It's the threat of trial that gets people out of jail."

Plea bargains help speed up the process, said Rekowski, whose position became full time Dec. 1, 2007.

"Plea negotiations have a bad reputation and they really don't deserve it," he said. "Plea bargaining is really two smart people coming together to see what a case is really worth. It isn't always what occurs in the courtroom."

Some prosecutors from the State's Attorney's Office work at the Criminal Justice Center, Mudge said. They cover for one another so cases aren't postponed. This setup ensures "a plea isn't delayed by someone's absence or vacation or duties for them to be elsewhere."

Mudge's office helps lower the jail's census, but it doesn't change procedure.

"We don't let the jail population affect our charging policy," he said.

Suicides and attempts

Conditions are not perfect at the jail, as the sheriff is first to admit. On Dec. 19, an unnamed inmate tried to hang himself. He survived the attempt but remains hospitalized.

The man was removed from his cell immediately, and jail staff administered cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Paramedics from the Edwardsville Fire Department responded to the scene and treated the inmate before taking him to an area hospital.

The Illinois State Police Public Integrity Unit is conducting the investigation.

In 2003, the Sheriff's Department created a special cellblock after two inmates successfully hanged themselves in their cells within a six-month span.

David Gargac of East Alton hanged himself on July 29, 2002. Thomas W. Holcomb, 27, of Jerseyville hanged

himself on Jan. 15, 2003.

In the more than 24 years at the jail's current site, 405 Randle St. in Edwardsville, three inmates have committed suicide: Gargac, Holcomb and Jerry L. Champion, 24, of Lebanon, who hanged himself in his cell Aug. 18, 1998.

"Three is too many for me; one is too many for me," Hertz said. "Those numbers are better than those numbers are on the outside (in the community in general)."

In 2006, an unidentified inmate attempted to hang himself, but other prisoners talked him out of it. The jail deputies didn't find out about the incident for three days.

Jail guards make rounds every 30 minutes and record the events in a computer watch log.

"The attempts are not common," Hertz said. "This is like running a hotel of 260 people that don't want to be here. But we understand it is our job and we do the best that we can."

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