CIVIL GRAND JURY

Report spotlights problems at jail

Crowding, inefficiency cited at county lockup

Jails

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SANTA CRUZ » The Santa Cruz County Main Jail is crowded, it needs better security and it should have stricter rules for inmates, according to a civil grand jury report.

Released in June, the report was based on interviews with correctional officers, administrators and medical staff in the past year. It also included visits to the jail at 259 Water St. in Santa Cruz in August and in January.

"Overcrowded housing conditions and inconsistent disciplinary practices create safety risks, health problems and increased demands on the Main Jail staff," the report stated. "We also observed inmate violations of rules and regulations."

The report stated some of the jail's medical staff who treat inmates were left without a correctional officer in the room at times

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DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL FILE

Santa Cruz Main Jail inmates line up to be transported to court appearances.

Jail

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and felt unsafe. Other problems included a lack of posting of jail rules, posters and towels in cells that could be used to hide contraband, and a lack of video surveillance in the booking area and medical clinic.

Monday, Sheriff-Elect Jim Hart said some of the problems spotlighted in the report already had been fixed.

Four more correctional officers are expected to be hired in the coming months, and part of their duties will be to escort inmates at the medical clinic and other areas of the jail.

"I totally agree. I think there should be an officer there inside the medical facility for a lot of the procedures," Hart said. "They can't necessarily be there all the time, but if it's a fairly quick procedure — which it usually is — they can be there."

The report added that about one in four inmates suffers from a mental disorder and receives psychotropic medication.

Hart said that jail rules have been posted on the walls since the grand jury's visit, and others at the jail said more video surveillance has been added.

Relieving crowding is a long-term process, he said. The Main Jail is rated to house 311 inmates, but its daily population usually tops that.

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Some relief has come from the Custody Alternatives Program, which includes electronic monitors for low-level offenders. With GPS ankle monitors, participants can leave the jail and continue to work or attend school or counseling with authorities' supervision.

The 392 people in the program in 2013 saved about 18,600 days in jail and $1.5 million in the Sheriff's Office budget, according to the report. Authorities have said that ankle monitor absconding is rare.

With a grant recently received from the state, county leaders also are renovating part of the Rountree Detention Center outside Watsonville to hold 64 inmates in a medium-security setting. It also will add educational and vocational programs for inmates.

Hart said construction is due to start in June 2015 and expected to finish at the end of 2017.

Another point brought up by the grand jury was the possibility of inmates participating in video conferencing for minor court appearances rather than having a deputy escort them to Santa Cruz County Superior Court. Hart said other counties do it, and it could save precious staff time if prosecutors, defense attorneys and court administrators approve it.

Sheriff's Office leaders must write a formal response to the grand jury report by early August. The grand jury also released five other reports on city and county issues in June.

"We're always glad to get some outside eyes," Hart said of the grand jury report. "We certainly appreciate their efforts."