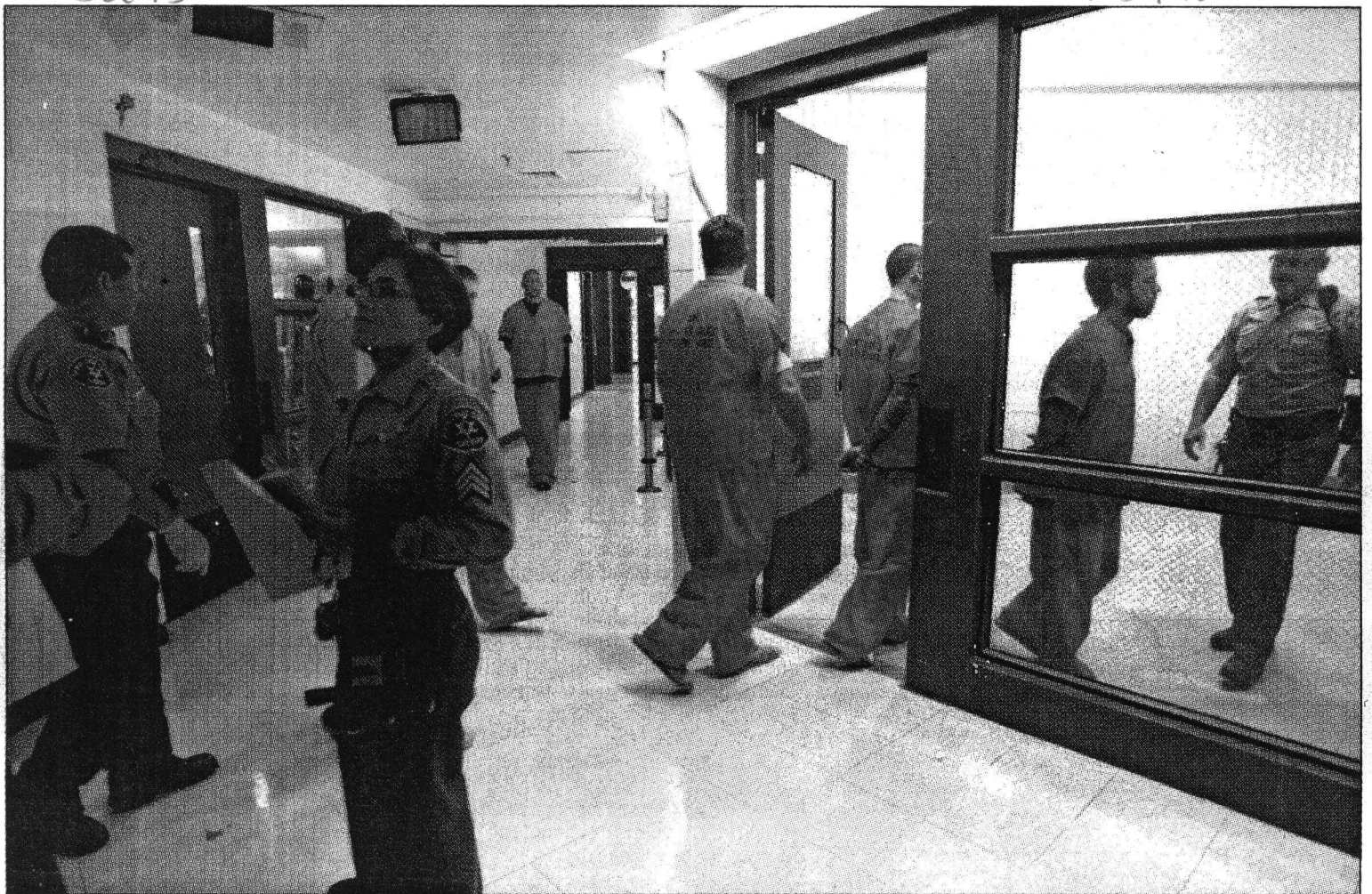


# Inmate health care may be outsourced



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL FILE PHOTOS

Santa Cruz County Jail is busy with traffic weekdays at 7 a.m. when dozens of inmates are checked for weapons, shackled and transported to court appearances. The sheriff hopes to transfer the medical treatment of inmates to a Monterey company.

**Sheriff says move would save \$600,000; county union objects**

By JASON HOPPIN

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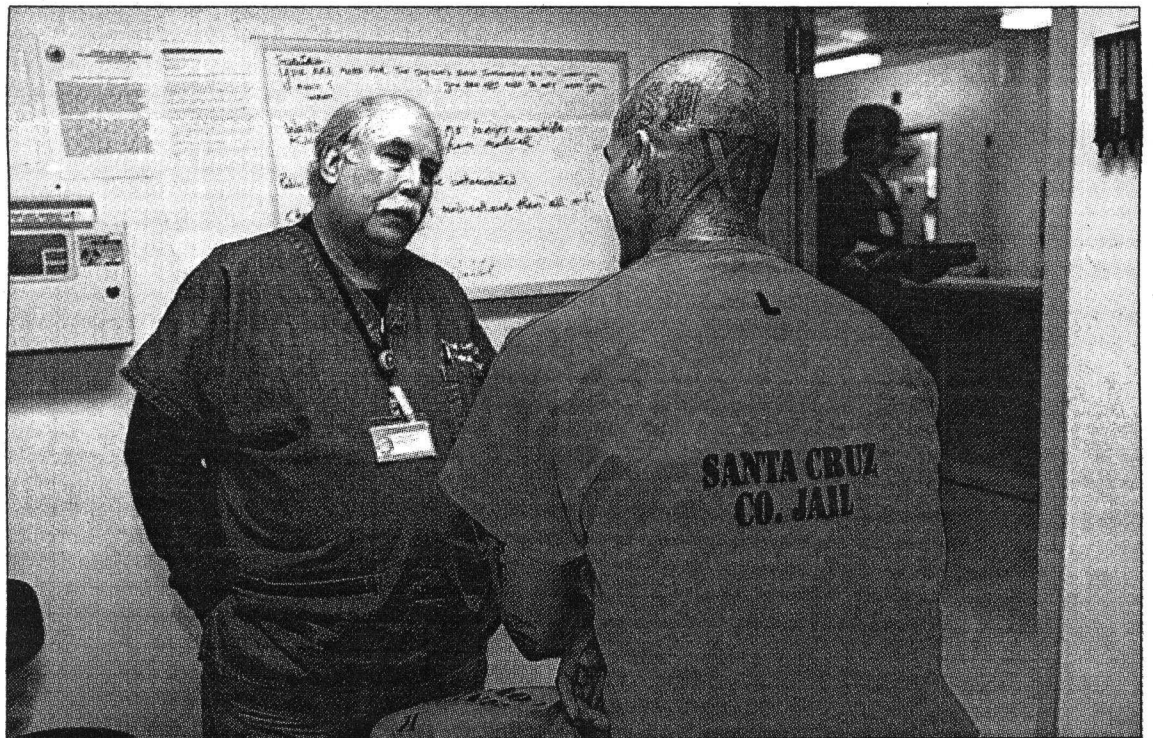
SANTA CRUZ — Tight budgets and the prospect of longer local jail stays are forcing Sheriff Phil Wowak to consider outsourcing the medical treatment of county inmates.

The proposal is contained within the sheriff's proposed annual budget, released earlier this month. According to the plan, the county would hand over prisoner treatment, including X-rays, prescriptions and more, to Monterey-based California Forensic Medical Group, saving an estimated \$600,000 in the process.

"With more long-term housing comes some more acute issues," said Lt. Shea Johnson, medical division commander at the County Jail. "The longer they stay, the more services they need."

The move, which has not been finalized, also would address ongoing problems with the county-run jail medical program, including recruitment difficulties and high turnover. About a dozen workers would be affected, though Johnson said they could be eligible for positions with California Forensic Medical Group.

"Not everyone wants to work in this kind of environment," John-



Jail doctor Arnie Leff meets with one of his many inmate addict patients at the Santa Cruz County Jail. Sheriff Phil Wowak wants to outsource medical treatment of inmates to a Monterey group, putting about a dozen county workers out of a job.

son said.

But the county's largest employee union has resisted the move. Jodi Capitola-Duran, chapter president of Service Employee International Union Local 521, said she is focused on mitigating job losses and ensuring continued services for inmates.

"We have been advocating for keeping medical services in-house. It's a shame that the sheriff allowed this service to fail by not filling vital positions when needed to provide care," Capitola-Duran said in a statement. "This is disappointing not only for families losing jobs in this economy, but for

our community that is losing vital public health services."

The proposal already has quietly advanced through the bidding stage, with California Forensic Medical Group poised to take over within months, should the county

# JAILS

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Board of Supervisors approve the move.

Board Chairman John Leopold said he has asked Wowak to consider allowing existing county workers to come up with a way to achieve the same savings while providing the same level of service.

"We shouldn't contract services out just to lower someone's pay," Leopold said.

## THE DEAL

A California Forensic Medical Group representative did not return a call for comment. But according to its county bid, a team of medical professionals would implement the program at Main Jail via a \$3 million annual contract. Johnson said she hoped the program could later be expanded

to the medium-security Rountree Detention Center outside Watsonville.

According to the group's website, it provides similar services for 25 counties statewide, a portfolio that began in 1984 with a contract to provide health care in Monterey County jails. Several Monterey County officials provided letters of recommendation as part of the company's bid for the Santa Cruz County contract.

Johnson said outsourcing medical services saves money because California Forensic Medical Group can negotiate cheaper rates and prices on medical equipment, providing services at the jail that the county cannot afford.

Providing those services in-house also would prevent sworn officers from having to transport inmates to local hospitals, Johnson said. She

added that some Santa Cruz County providers refuse to see inmates, requiring deputies to make time-consuming (and costly to taxpayers) trips out of county to provide legally required medical services.

According to the bid, California Forensic Medical Group would increase other services such as having more hours for on-site dental providers. Medical staff would not be involved in the collection of forensic evidence such as blood or tissue samples, and prisoners could not be used for medical research.

Furthermore, California Forensic Medical Group would become the custodian of all county inmate medical



WOWAK

records. The group also would provide an annual report of medical services to the county.

The group is not the same as Forensic Medical Group Inc., which has come under broad scrutiny for its handling of autopsies across the state. However, California Forensic Medical Group was named in a recently settled lawsuit over an inmate who died in a Stanislaus County jail after a struggle with deputies.

Under a shift of state prisoners to county jails, criminal sentences for nonviolent, nonserious, nonsex offenses — versus just one year — can be served in local jails.

That is expected to drive up local prison populations across the state, and the county is working to handle the expected influx of inmates.

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