

Daily challenges of county jails changes over the years

Written by Steve Metzger, Lawton Constitution
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Stephens County Sheriff Wayne McKinney says he never would have dreamed when he was first elected in 2009 that he would one day have five people accused of murder in his jail all at the same time, all under the age of 21. But he did this past year.

Likewise, he never would have thought that gang members would become such a problem, including one inmate associated with the "Honduran mafia" who recently set a fire in his cell, forcing the dangerous evacuation of inmates to another part of the lockup and hospital treatment of a jailer for smoke inhalation. But the sheriff did.

Mirroring Stephens County, the average age of inmates at the Comanche County Detention Center has fallen in recent years, Chief Administrator William Hobbs said. And he, too, has seen an increase in the number of gang members and in gang violence in the jail.

"When I first started (the average age) was probably 35-40. As time has passed, they're getting younger and younger. The average now is below 30," Hobbs said. "I may have four or five gangs I'm trying to keep separate, but I don't have the room."

Adding to their daily challenges, both McKinney and Hobbs said they have had to deal with increasing numbers of females being incarcerated and also with inmates who don't speak English. As jail populations have risen, they've had more and more problems, too, with offenders who are addicted to drugs or who have serious mental health issues, or both.

"The mental health problems keep increasing mainly because the state has reduced funding for helping people with their mental health problems," Hobbs said. "A lot of people medicate themselves with street drugs, then when they get locked up their mental health problems come back. So now you've got to deal with them on a different level."

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Added McKinney: “Mental illness is a big, major problem and I’m not set up for that. I know the State of Oklahoma has dropped the ball on this issue.”

If that weren’t enough, overcrowding and funding issues are even bigger concerns. If his worst fears about continued funding come to pass in Comanche County, Hobbs said he believes budgets would have to be cut, detention center jobs probably lost and public safety could be jeopardized.

The Comanche County Detention Center’s capacity is supposed to be 283, but the average number of inmates housed there is 292. Hobbs said the jail has been cited twice since August 2012 for overcrowding.

The Stephens County Jail, which has an official capacity of 162, also has been cited for overcrowding by the state jail inspector. McKinney said at times he’s had to house more than 200 inmates.

Something that has contributed to problems of jail overcrowding in Comanche, Stephens and counties across the state has been the tendency of the Oklahoma Department of Corrections to leave people in local lockups who have already been through the court system and who have been sentenced to time in state prison. County administrators say inmates awaiting transfer take up needed cell space; and they complain that the \$27 or so a day the state pays them in compensation is inadequate to cover their costs. Hobbs said Comanche County has a contract with the state to house such already sentenced state inmates on a more permanent basis. It pays \$32.50 a day — and that might barely cover the county’s per-inmate costs. S

Even if there have been serious questions raised about compensation, jail administrators in some counties have been upset by recent moves made by the state to expedite the process of moving newly sentenced inmates out of county jails. In Stephens County, McKinney said he would prefer to see those inmates moved as quickly as possible. In the case of the Honduran gang member who started a fire, the sheriff said he made a call to the Department of Corrections the next day demanding to move the inmate. In Comanche County, Hobbs said he would only prefer to keep inmates at \$27 a day compensation if his jail were well below capacity something that hasn’t happened in a while.

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“(But) a lot of these smaller jails use that \$27 a day as cash flow. They’ve got to have that money coming in on a regular basis,” Hobbs said.

While losing inmates at \$27 a day isn’t a concern in Comanche County, Hobbs said the county has its contract with the state to house up to 44 minimum-security inmates, who already have been through the court system and have been sentenced to state prison time, at that reimbursement rate of \$32.50 a day. If the state continues to move aggressively to clear inmates out of county facilities and the county’s contract is trimmed down or canceled, it would mean a serious loss of revenue.

The Comanche County Detention Center has an annual operating cost of just over \$3.4 million. A little more than \$500,000 of that is covered by the contract the county has with the state. The detention center also receives compensation (\$52 a day) whenever it houses a prisoner for the U.S. Marshals Service; and it earns much smaller revenue streams through commissary and telephone services provided to inmates.

The state inmate contract comes up for renewal this month, Hobbs said. This is also a month of watching and waiting because that’s when local voters will be asked to support continuing an existing sales tax that supports the Comanche County Detention Center, and adding an additional 1/8 cent tax to offset rising detention center costs. Hobbs said he works hard to keep costs down; average food costs per day per inmate are just \$3.08. But even a small increase in the price of a loaf of bread can have a big impact on the jail’s budget. He estimated the average daily cost of running the detention center is \$9,451.44. He said he considers passage of the sales tax imperative.

In Stephens County, McKinney’s facility benefits from a three-tenths-of-a-percent county sales tax. As in Comanche County, he said he definitely has no money to spare.

While Hobbs has estimated his daily per-inmate cost at \$32.38, McKinney estimates his at \$38. That’s the main reason he can’t justify taking on a contract to house state inmates. Both men

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said they would support passage of legislation that would allow counties to have more say in determining how much the state should pay in compensation for Department of Corrections inmates. The jail administrators agreed that adequate funding of jails and state prison facilities is a serious public safety issue.

“If I didn’t have to run the jail at all, it would be half the headaches,” McKinney said. “The jail is a big headache.”

McKinney added, though, that he doesn’t believe answers to problems can be found in contracts with privately run facilities. “I think the state-run prisons can be run more efficiently. I feel the same way about county jails,” he said.