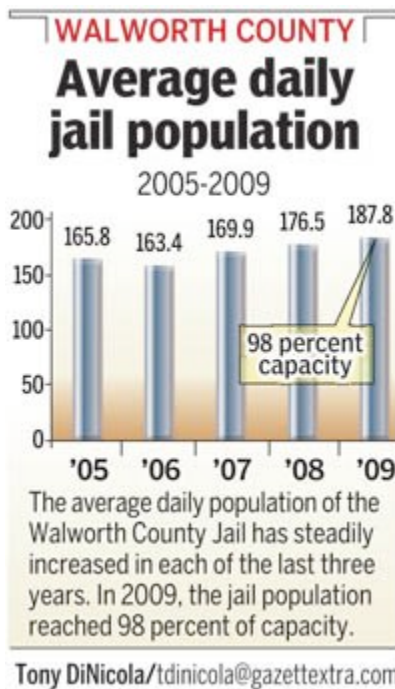


Crowding remains an issue at Walworth County Jail

By ANN MARIE AMES

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Photo 



ELKHORN — It could be months before Walworth County is ready to launch programs designed to ease over-crowding at its jail.

However, the effects of careful study and communication already are evident among Walworth County Board members and others charged with making changes at the jail, board member Dave Weber said.

Weber is chairman of the board's executive committee, which Monday morning saw the results of a months-long study of inmate population data. The public safety and justice committee already has seen the data and the corresponding recommendations from Pretrial Justice Institute, a consultant hired in August to study the jail population.

Now it will be up to the county to draft recommendations of alternatives to incarceration that could strike a balance between the need to punish criminals and the need to ease crowding and expenses at

the jail, Weber said.

The county could produce recommendations within a few months, he said.

Based on the results of the study, Pretrial Justice Institute recommends:

-- The county draft a vision statement based on the results of the study.

-- The county's jail and information technology staff members work together to improve the way inmate data is collected and reported.

-- The county should make sure the collected data is comprehensive. It is important to track information about inmates' life circumstances as opposed to simply recording charges and sentences. Complete data would help the county incarcerate criminals in the least-restrictive way while still protecting the community.

"To deal with the factors that define individual risk, many jurisdictions have found that the systematic collection of information about the individual's background—current situation, criminal history, mental health and alcohol/drug abuse history, family connections, and employment status—is critical," according to Pretrial Justice Institute.

Addressing jail crowding will truly be a team effort, Weber said. County officials from many departments will look at the possibility of a drug court that would provide treatment options rather than jail time for those charged with drug offenses, how to decrease the number of days inmates wait for sentences or court dates, how to better collect data and options for alternative programs such as monitoring bracelets.

The county's intent is not to lighten the punishment for people who break the law, Weber said. It's more about spending money as wisely as possible, he said.

"I don't want people to think, 'Gee, we're not going to lock people up.' It's a matter of refining the process so we don't expend any more revenue than we need to."

BY THE NUMBERS

-- Booking numbers at the Walworth County Jail have decreased 14 percent in the last five years; the average daily population in the jail has increased 13 percent. The county booked 6,127 people in 2005 compared to 5,298 in 2009

-- The majority of jail admissions are residents of Walworth County, 35 years old or younger, male, and white.

-- Almost half of the inmates were jailed on only one charge, and 90 percent were booked in the jail at least once before.

-- The most prevalent first charges in 2009 were probation holds, intoxicated driving and disorderly conduct.

- The average length of stay for all inmates in 2009 was 26.29 days; the total number of jail bed days used was 138,653.
- Sentenced inmates accounted for 62 percent of all jail bed days. Inmates in pretrial status used 11 percent, and those with probation hold status used 11 percent.
- The average daily population of the jail section has gone from 166 in 2005 to 188—or 98 percent of capacity—in 2009.
- Sixty-five percent of inmates are released within a day of being booked. Eighty-one percent are released within a week. Thirteen percent are held longer than three weeks. That includes 9 percent who stay more than six weeks.

These figures likely understate how quickly pretrial inmates are released because of the way the jail monitors data on inmates.

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