

Jails face tough budget questions



Written by

BRIAN GADD
Staff Writer

Mar 27, 2011

COSHOCTON -- Coshocton Municipal Court had a 96 percent conviction rate in drunken driving cases in 2009, according to the latest statewide court statistics released by the Ohio Supreme Court.

But where to put those convicted of local crimes -- jail sentences or driver intervention and treatment programs are typical -- is a looming concern due to proposed state budget cuts.

A proposal in Gov. John Kasich's biennial budget would cut in half a program which pays for indigent drunken driving offenders to attend a 72-hour intervention program rather than go to jail.

Those the court has found unable to pay and amenable to the program would be forced to pay half of the cost of the program under the proposal.

Kasich also has proposed selling five state prisons to private operators and asked the state's Sentencing Commission to look at restructuring some felonies as

misdemeanors, which could put more inmates in local jails.

On top of that, the Licking-Muskingum Community-Based Correction Center in Newark, another nearby jail alternative available to local courts, had \$1.8 million cut out of its budget by the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections and could close this summer without replacement funding.

The facility has housed residents referred from courts in Licking, Muskingum, Richland, Knox and Coshocton counties.

And cuts to mental health and addiction services also could lead to more potential problems, taking away counseling services, which can help guard against offenders going through the court system again and again.

"As far as my jail, it is well known that we are under-staffed (there are nine corrections officers, and a communications dispatcher is the only officer on duty at

Advertisement



Fast, convenient,
AND affordable

Save on select
Wireless*
All-in-Ones,
Photo Printers
and Lasers

Save Today

Limited time offers

Shop Now

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

night) and overcrowded in inmates, so any future impact of more inmates would have a direct effect," said Coshocton County Sheriff Tim Rogers. "For certain, I believe that any attempt to reduce the populations of our prisons will lead to more overcrowding in our county jails."

In nearby Muskingum County, Sheriff Matt Lutz is in the same boat.

"If they sell the prisons like he (Kasich) has proposed and they do away with fourth- and fifth-degree felonies and make them misdemeanors, we could have some problems," Lutz said. "They are even talking about making some drug offenses non-violent offenses."

Previous changes to sentencing laws and for repeat offenders, requiring mandatory jail time, has meant more inmates being held in already or almost overcrowded jails.

The Coshocton County Jail was designed to house fewer than 20 inmates, Municipal Court Judge Timothy France said.

According to a report filed in 2008 by Jail Administrator Lt. James MacDonald, the jail used to house a maximum of 62 inmates, when juveniles were held there along with adults. There were 46 regular beds along with 16 for holding, medical, disciplinary and work release.

At one time in the mid-1990s, as many as 98 inmates were held there, with the overflow sleeping on cots in the jail's rec room.

The jail has 60 beds, not counting portable cots, MacDonald said. In recent years, the average daily roster has been in the upper 50s. According to rosters from this past week, the average daily numbers have been in the 40s.

Usually about half the inmates at the jail are sent there by France, with the remainder coming from the common pleas court or juvenile proceedings, France said.

"We're already to the point where we're seeing more felonies in the local jails," he said. "Whatever happens, we'll just have to work through it."

MacDonald has only one male and one female corrections officer per shift to oversee the inmates, in addition to himself, and only one, who doubles as a dispatcher, on midnight shift.

A jail feasibility study was conducted a few years ago to look at a larger jail. A proposed 120-bed facility was estimated to cost the county \$12 million.

Advertisement



Fast, convenient,
AND affordable

Save on select
Wireless*
All-in-Ones,
Photo Printers
and Lasers

Save Today

Limited time offers

Shop Now >

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

Rogers said he would reserve judgment on how the proposed changes could affect the jail until they are approved.

"The effects of sentencing (changes) is still up in the air, since the governor only proposed this (budget) at this time, although I am confident that this will pass," Rogers said. "I will reserve my comments until it does, and I get a chance to review the budget in its final form."

Despite the ever-present overcrowding concern, Rogers said he works with the local courts to ensure no inmate is turned away and will continue to do so.

"It is always a challenge to serve the court sentencing and maintain a jail budget, so we are always looking for fresh ideas of how we can continue to serve our court's commitments and maintain safety standards," Rogers said. "We are blessed to have great judges that are willing to work with us in doing this."

France said he tries to structure the sentencings in different ways to help alleviate any overcrowding concerns, but eventually a repeat offender wears out his welcome in France's court.

"We'll give them opportunity after opportunity so we don't have to send them to jail, but eventually there's no leeway and they have to go to jail," he said. "The sheriff and I and the probation office, we work hard on not putting them in, give them opportunities to make changes, because we're trying to be sensitive to the jail situation."

France said with the system currently in place, he doesn't think changes at the state level will have a drastic effect on how sentences and inmates are handled.

"I think we could see more misdemeanor thefts that used to be felonies, but I don't think it will be anything we can't handle," France said.

He said Kasich's call to reduce the state prison population could increase the court caseload and potentially impact the number of individuals he sends to the jail. The cuts to mental health programs also are a concern, he said.

"We can put people on house arrest, the alcohol monitoring. We just need to adapt and adjust," France added. "The mental health counseling cuts, that's where we could have some serious trouble, because people getting out of jail or prison won't have access to that support system. But the sheriff has already said 'you sentence them, we'll put them somewhere.' Like everyone, we just have to do more with

Advertisement



Fast, convenient,
AND affordable

Save on select
Wireless*
All-in-Ones,
Photo Printers
and Lasers

Save Today

Limited time offers

Shop Now

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™



less."

bgadd@coshoctontribune.com; (740)
450-6752

Advertisement

Fast, convenient,
AND affordable

Save on select
Wireless*
All-in-Ones,
Photo Printers
and Lasers

Save Today

Limited time offers

Shop Now

Dell logo

The advertisement features a green background with a white Dell logo in the top right corner. The main text is in white and black, promoting savings on select wireless all-in-ones, photo printers, and lasers. A black Dell printer is shown in the center, with a white paper tray. A white button with orange text says "Save Today". A small white plus sign icon is in the bottom left, and a white button with green text says "Shop Now".

Print Powered By FormatDynamics™