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Jail work paying off

Because the surest way to confirm the need for a bigger jail is to build one and watch it fill up, Sedgwick County wisely reversed course on a planned \$55 million expansion in 2008 and decided to try to manage its way out of a crowding problem. To the credit of all involved, it's working so far.

The monthly report delivered last week by County Manager William Buchanan to county commissioners showed year-to-year declines in bookings, length of stay and other categories, with an average jail population this year of 1,508 — a long way from the days when it seemed headed for 2,000.

With the guidance of the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, the county has used alternative programs such as day reporting, pretrial services, adult intensive supervision, and mental health and drug courts to try to reserve jail space for people who are threats to public safety. "We can't afford any longer to put people in jail that we're just mad at.... So we've designed programs for people who've made mistakes to correct their lives," Buchanan told commissioners.

The county also has made progress in reducing the amount of time it takes to file journal entries, reports required before a defendant is transferred from jail to state prison. The Eagle reported in January 2010 that the lag time was 60 to 90 days; as of two months ago, it was 12. What a positive change.

Meanwhile, the city of Wichita is stepping up use of its own alternatives to jail, including mental health court, drug court probation and DUI diversion. "You would expect that Wichita would be increasing those programs to keep people out of the jail rather than paying us for those issues," said Buchanan, referring to the \$2.09-an-hour fee the county has charged cities since 2008 to jail those arrested on municipal charges.

"If we continue with these kinds of programs and if we move toward some other programs like a work center, the possibility exists that we will not need a new jail. Currently, it's not on the horizon," Buchanan said.

Sheriff Robert Hinshaw is less optimistic, telling The Eagle last week it is "false hope" to think we won't need to build a new jail and that "eventually we will have to plan for it."

Indeed, the county has land near Furley that could be used for a new jail or work-release center as needed.

And it's premature to declare that the jail is no longer, as County Commissioner Karl Peterjohn so colorfully once put it, a "large, un lanceable boil on the body politic."

But the county's efforts are paying off for now, pushing any jail-construction project into the future.

That's a victory for the creative problem solvers at the county and its municipal partners, especially during a rough economy and budget environment. It's also a victory for taxpayers.

For the editorial board, Rhonda Holman

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