



Jail overcrowding a serious problem locally, state-wide, officials say

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JOHNSON CITY, Tenn. -- --

Despite spending millions of tax dollars trying to solve the problem of jail overcrowding, area jails continue to fill up tonight.

Sullivan County's jail has an inmate population of 706 people; 81 over capacity.

And, not long after Carter County opens its new \$26 million jail in March, it could be over capacity too.

Today, Carter County has 260 inmates. The new jail is built for no more than 302.

For a third of 2011, Washington County's exceeded its 578 inmate capacity.

At one point housing 619 inmates, just two years after unveiling a \$7 million expansion.

11Connects found out until there's a permanent solution, criminals will keep costing taxpayers money.

Washington County's jail expansion is barely two years old; the new part of the facility opened in Summer of 2009. And, it's already almost at capacity.

"I figured that what was going to happen was we would be full the day we opened up and we basically were and have been almost ever since," said Washington County Sheriff Ed Graybeal.

Whether it be the result of a growing population, the area's dependence on drugs, or the economy - jail overcrowding continues to be a problem.

"It's probably going to be very, very, very hard to solve the way our system is set up in the United States," Graybeal said.

Lieutenant Governor Ron Ramsey says the state is aware of the issue.

"I don't know what the solution is but I do think we are doing our best to address it," Ramsey said.

The Department of Corrections is spending \$144 million to expand a prison in Bledsoe County.

When it opens in 2013, area counties should be able to send some of the state inmates they house back to prison.

State inmates make up more than 20 percent of Washington County's jail population.

Still, both sides agree it's not a permanent fix.

"It seems like we'll build a new prison and that works for awhile and then overcrowding begins again," says Ramsey.

"I think if you see them build a prison, it'll kind of be like turning a faucet on. It's going to fill up, we're going to fill up. It's a constant," Graybeal says.

Ramsey also says at some point, maybe when the economy turns around, Tennessee is going to have to consider giving counties more money to house state prisoners.

Sheriff Graybeal says right now, he only receives \$35 a day from the state per inmate.

Not a lot of money, when you consider it costs roughly \$20 more a day to house and feed a single inmate.

Washington County says it spends \$55 per inmate per day.

And we're talking about at least 500 inmates a day. On some days much more.