

Jail population at record high

Other sites must take in some inmates

By Jessica Langdon

Tuesday, January 25, 2011

The Wichita County Jail hit an all-time high population of 633 on Sunday.

By midmorning on Monday, the figure had dropped to 622, but both numbers basically guarantee Wichita County will have to house some of its inmates in other counties' facilities. On Monday, the total included 60 inmates the county had to transfer to other areas.

"This is purely overcrowding," Sheriff David Duke said of the need to house some of the county's inmates elsewhere.

The county has been watching the inmate population rise over the past two years, he said. That issue has combined with other concerns during that time. The Wichita County Sheriff's Office has had to move people within the county and to other counties with which it has contracts as it dealt with some structural issues — particularly when it came to leaks — and worked to bolster security measures. With those concerns addressed within the current facilities for now, the county is still dealing with a need to send people out of the county.

The Wichita County Jail has 624 beds, but the jail can reach its capacity long before every bed is filled. Men and women cannot be housed together, and someone in jail on a misdemeanor charge also would not be housed with someone considered a violent offender. Those are just a couple of the classification requirements.

In many cases, people are finding themselves unable to get out of jail once they're in. Some of them are repeat offenders with higher bonds, Duke said. Some of those are under indictment. Some of the offenses — aggravated assault, homicide, robbery — are serious, and bonds tend to be higher.

"We manage it," Duke said. "We're predicting the population to be extremely high by summer."

The county has been looking into reasons for the high population as well as ways to manage the numbers.

The county judge is waiting on the results of an indigent defense study, Duke said.

The new county court at law judges — County Court at Law No. 1 Judge Gary Butler and County Court at Law No. 2 Judge Greg King — have hit the ground running, "ramping up their dockets" to get misdemeanor cases through, Duke said.

Butler said during his first three weeks in office, County Court at Law No. 1 alone disposed of about 150 cases. The court also had one jury trial and had another scheduled to begin this week.

With trials and setting hearings, the court is sending a message it's serious about taking care of these cases, he said.

He also referred to the large size of a recent arraignment docket.

"We've got big dockets," he said.

Butler said the District Attorney's Office was also doing its part.

Wichita County District Attorney Maureen Shelton explained some of the numbers the office has seen in recent years in terms of cases.

The number of indictments and informations has basically remained consistent, coming in at 1,350 filed in 2010 and 1,332 in 2009.

The number of jury trials in district courts has grown. In 2010, 28 felony trials and three juvenile trials added up to a total of 31. That's up from 2009, when there were 25 felony trials and no juvenile trials. In 2008, there were 20 trials.

Visiting judges have helped with some of the cases.

Total dispositions are also up, Shelton said. There were 1,335 in 2010 compared to 1,122 in 2009 and 1,210 in 2008.

While a lot of uncertainty exists this early into the Texas legislative session, which began Jan. 17, Duke believes issues addressed by the Legislature will have an impact on local communities. Lawmakers are dealing with a \$15 to \$27 billion budget shortfall, and cuts are expected in just about every area, from education to mental health to highways to prisons.

"There's no doubt cuts are coming," Duke said.

Duke believes the mental health issue could have a real impact, and could lead to a greater population in the jail.

The prison system also deals with population concerns, he said, and the county has had inmates who are "paper ready" to start serving sentences in prison but have waited at the county level until space was available.

Duke has received two appointments to two Sheriff's Association of Texas committees — the Jail Advisory Committee, which provides input regarding daily efforts as the counties work to maintain safe jails and comply with rules and regulations of the Texas Commission on Jail Standards, and the Legislative Committee, which brings together sheriffs from a number of counties across the state to participate in the legislative process and provide input on bills that could have an impact.

Duke looks forward to participating on the committees and working alongside sheriffs from across the state. He said this gives all the members an opportunity to learn from one another about measures that work and ways to improve. When it comes to laws and other impacts from the state, circumstances that affect one county will affect all.

Duke plans to take part in an upcoming jail advisory board meeting.

Drugs are one issue that have been having a major effect on the North Texas community, and Duke has said drugs like methamphetamine and cocaine drive other crimes.

Law enforcement agents have been active in working drug labs and other offenses and making arrests, but even taking a proactive stance on meth hasn't slowed things down, Duke said.

Staying on top of the jail population numbers is an everyday battle.

"Every day, we've got to manage it," Duke said.



© 2011 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online