

Marion County plans to cut jail population by 56 to trim budget

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SALEM, Ore. — Marion County plans to release 56 low-risk offenders and close part of the county jail in what Sheriff Jason Myers says is a response to a cut in state funds.

The plan would close one jail pod and reopen part of a work center that allows inmates to hold jobs during the day.

Housing prisoners at the work center is half as costly, Myers said. Work-center inmates don't receive medical treatment provided by the county, but inmates in the jail do, for example, the Salem Statesman Journal (<http://stjr.nl/nwJXOW>) reported.

Myers said there would be no mass release, and only inmates judged to pose a low risk would go free. Others will be moved to the work center, he said.

The county commissioners approved the plan Wednesday. It was the result of less-than-expected state aid, and it means eliminating five vacant corrections officer positions.

"It's disappointing we have to close jail beds," Commissioner Patti Milne said. "There's always going to be a risk of the public discomfort, and we don't want that."

Each year, 16,000 people are taken to the jail. Inmates housed there are serving a sentence of one year or less, awaiting trial or serving sanctions for parole and probation violations. The average time in custody is 17 days.

Clatsop County Sheriff Thomas Bergin, president of the statewide sheriffs association, said other counties are going to face similar problems.

In Lane County, the jail size was cut by 84 beds earlier this year to help balance the budget.

"When you start taking things away from us that we've been using to make the community safe, that runs the risk of more criminal activity," Bergin said. "Once a machine is working efficiently, you don't change the gears in it."