

## Consultants recommend 250-bed expansion to jail

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Consultants share tips for reducing inmate population that include alternative sentencing, establishment of a drug court and purchase of software to improve efficiency of justice system.

Based on current trends Midland County will need a jail that can house up to 650 inmates within a decade, but by following recommendations from a consulting firm hired to study jail overcrowding the number of new beds needed could be reduced to 150, the Commissioners' Court was told Monday.

The Commissioners' Court heard reports from Carl Reynolds, executive director of the Office of Court Administration, and from members of the consulting firm Carl R. Griffiths and Associates, who provided suggestions for strategies that could be implemented to reduce the number of inmates being incarcerated in the county's jail over the next few years.

Reynolds and the consulting firm founded by Carl Griffiths, the former sheriff and county judge of Jefferson County, both suggested the county invest in a new software system that could be utilized by each department involved in criminal justice. In some instances, they noted, the same data is being entered five or more times, slowing down the process of trying and eventually releasing inmates from custody.

"The centerpiece of what we'd like to suggest is that you work toward having an integrated information system. Each actor in the criminal justice system should have the information they need to do their job," Reynolds said. "Data should, ideally, be entered once."

The report provided by Griffith's company indicated the Midland County District Attorney's office has "apparently long operated under the assumption that cases had to be presented to the grand jury for the court to which the case was assigned," resulting in delays of up to three weeks before the district attorney can present a case. The report indicates the CRG team recommended the district attorney's office utilize any grand jury available from one of the four district courts. This practice was adopted during the course of the study, resulting in a "small but positive impact on reducing the daily jail population."

CRG also suggested the courts consider, when possible, giving priority to hearing cases involving defendants who are still in custody in order to reduce the amount of time they are incarcerated in the county's jail. The consulting firm further suggested eliminating a requirement that indigent defendants who are unable to afford the services of a private bail bondsman wait 24 hours before they are

permitted to utilize the county's pretrial services, which provides a low-cost bond to help eligible inmates get out of jail while awaiting trial. Changing this policy could save the county \$150,000 per year, the consulting firm estimated.

"(A 24 hour pretrial services) waiting period is, in a sense, a punishment to indigent people," Griffiths said. "People that can't afford to get out of jail are the only ones having to wait 24 hours. If you know they're indigent, a bonding company isn't going to take them on anyway."

CRG consultant Richard Kirkland, former sheriff of Washoe County, Nev. and former director of the Nevada Department of Public Safety, also shared suggestions with the Commissioners' Court for the implementation of an alternative sentencing program. He indicated that if judges began offering certain alternatives to incarceration it could reduce the inmate population and potentially reduce recidivism by generating income for educational programs to help inmates start a new life.

At the jail in Washoe County, Kirkland said, certain offenders were allowed to forego incarceration if they agreed to work on projects, such as the construction of sheds that were sold to fund programs intended to provide them with life skills. In its report, CRG noted it costs about \$50 per day to incarcerate someone in a county jail. If 10 people were assigned the task of cutting grass or cleaning parks or streets the county would save \$500 a day, in addition to the cost of performing these services. Griffiths recommended reaching out to retired law enforcement officers and offering them part-time pay, sans benefits, in order to supervise work crews

"In a year's time, one 10-person work crew a day would represent a direct savings in jail expenses of \$182,500 a year in jail cost," the report stated. "If a laborer in Midland is paid \$10 per hour for lawn maintenance, a 10-person crew will represent a savings to the county of nearly \$200,000. The combined savings can approach \$400,000, less the cost of a jailer to supervise the crew."

Griffith's company also recommended offering inmates who are employed the opportunity to serve their sentences on the weekend, allowing them to continue supporting their families while also "serving their debt to the community."

"You've got to change some lives because you can't build your way out of this," Griffiths said.

An additional recommendation calls for the implementation of a "drug court." Kirkland said this would include designating a district judge to handle cases involving drug charges and offenders would be placed under his or her "close supervision." The judge would outline a series of requirements such as regular drug testing, rehabilitation and periodic reports directly to the judge on the effectiveness of the program. The report indicated one member of CRG experienced a 20 percent reduction in the inmate population after the establishment of a drug court.

While members of the consulting team expressed confidence these and other strategies will help reduce the number of inmates, they said it is still clear additional jail space will be needed.

Kirkland said they recommend reserving the current jail for housing "maximum security" offenders and some "medium security" offenders and constructing additional jail space for lower-level and less violent or disruptive offenders. He said the firm suggests constructing a jail designed to support a "direct supervision" approach, in which guards are on the floor with inmates directly monitoring and interacting with them, as opposed to reproducing the current design.

Presently, the Midland County Detention Center consists mostly of pods -- some of which include individual cells and others that consist of cells with multiple inmates -- housing up to 48 inmates that are monitored by a guard in a separately enclosed control booth. Counties that have adopted direct supervision practices have experienced lower levels of violence against guards, Kirkland indicated. Additionally, the pods could be constructed with "open-bay bunking," rather than individual cells, which would reduce construction costs. Inmates who are disruptive or violent could be transferred to the maximum-security section of the jail, which provides an incentive for inmates to behave.

"Across the country it has been absolutely proven beyond a statistical doubt that when done correctly (direct supervision) reduces violence to an almost insignificant level," Kirkland said.

County Commissioners' expressed strong support for the recommendations made by Reynolds and the CRG team and vowed to work closely with other elected officials to implement the suggestions. District Judge Dean Rucker, District Attorney Teresa Clingman and Sheriff Gary Painter echoed the Commissioners' Court's praise for the recommendations.

"I think it was great to have someone review practices and policies and give us a very candid overview of what they think and recommendations," Painter said. "Whatever we can do to save taxpayers' (money), make it safer for inmates and employees we're going to do what we can to get it done."

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