'Renting' jail beds offers a stopgap, not a solution

By Stan Sniff

Easing jail crowding – while minimizing early inmate releases – has long been a priority of the Riverside County Sheriff’s Department. Toward that end, the department supports and employs a mix of options, including jail construction and expansion; optimization of programs for inmate rehabilitation; practical alternatives to incarceration; and, when possible, agreements with other jurisdictions to house a small number of Riverside County inmates.

The latter approach – contracting for additional jail beds – is neither new nor a solution for the county’s chronic shortage of jail space. That shortage, which dates to a 1993 federal court injunction that caps the number of inmates county jails can hold, was exacerbated by the 2011 state AB 109 realignment law that shifted responsibility for “low level” felons from California prisons to county jails. The result: Riverside County now must process early releases at an average rate of 600 per month, compared with about 100 per month prior to realignment.

Contract beds address a small part of this enormous space shortage. In 2013, for example, Riverside County contracted with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to send up to 200 county inmates to a firefighting and fire-prevention camp program, where qualified inmates learn skills and provide community service. Riverside County was the first county to strike such a deal.

Similarly, the county in June approved a four-year agreement to house up to 35 inmates in Imperial County jails. Riverside County maintains 3,914 beds at five jails countywide, which means the agreement with Imperial helps with less than 1 percent of our inmate population – the best deal available after surveying many potential partners.

Imperial chooses which inmates to accept and will only take those who are healthy and cooperative. And should Imperial decide at any time to withdraw housing for a Riverside County inmate, Riverside County must pick up that inmate within two days for return to a facility here. For these reasons and others, it would be impractical to send large numbers of inmates to out-of-area jails.

Nor do such contracts save money. Riverside County will pay Imperial $82.83 per day per inmate. While at first glance this may seem cheaper than Riverside County’s daily cost, such comparisons are misleading. First, if Riverside County does not send an inmate to Imperial County, that inmate will have to be released per the 1993 federal court injunction on jail crowding. So it is actually cheaper for Riverside County not to contract with Imperial, but each federal release diminishes public
safety. Second, the price tag for housing inmates in Imperial includes little more than housing. Riverside County still must pay for hospital care and transportation—which means that renting Imperial’s jail beds offers no real savings even when compared to the daily cost of housing an inmate in Riverside County.

The true value of the deal with Imperial County is this: It provides minor help with inmate crowding while more permanent solutions take root. For example, Riverside County broke ground July 9th on the East County Detention Center in Indio, which will replace a 353-bed jail with a 1,626-bed facility, for a net gain of 1,273 beds. Yet even after this expansion is completed in 2018, our jail system will lack enough jail beds to satisfy public safety. Police officers will continue to cite and release arrestees instead of booking them into jail, and the Sheriff’s Department will still have to choose whom to release early per the federal court injunction.

These realities, along with steady population growth projected for Riverside County, help explain why our jail system needs long-term solutions. A former county plan for a regional detention center, with up to 7,200 beds at build-out over time, is just the sort of big-picture thinking required.

While critics of such construction call for broader use of alternatives to incarceration, longstanding programs—including education, drug treatment, work release, re-entry, and electronic monitoring—will continue to help but cannot offset the need for new facilities. The acute lack of jail space actually works at cross-purposes with rehabilitation efforts: Without jail time as a “hammer” for noncompliance, inmates have no incentive to enroll in the rehabilitation programs provided. Likewise, Prop. 47, the 2014 state voter initiative that reclassified some felonies as misdemeanors, stands to mitigate only a small portion of the growth in jail crowding over time.

The Sheriff’s Department is pleased to explore new ideas and changing dynamics as may be productive, but there is no responsible alternative to adding significant long-term jail space in Riverside County. Contracting with other counties for minor relief is a worthy step, but no one should confuse such stopgaps with genuine solutions.

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