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News

Jail crowding easing as programs take effect

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By Charles Crumm, Journal Register News Service

For Sheriff Michael Bouchard, the holidays are shaping up to be a blessing.

As the official jailer for Oakland County, he heads into the holiday season with 1,779 inmates in the jail, more than 100 less than the current capacity of 1,893 after a couple of years of overcrowding emergencies.

Much of the credit goes to changes in state law and more alternatives to punish offenders.

"We have a lot of options to punish nonviolent offenders without necessarily having them in jail 24/7," Bouchard said.

But that wasn't always the case and the overcrowding reached a peak a couple of years ago, triggering numerous early releases required under state law.

That, in turn, led a push to change state law and the creation of the county's Criminal Justice Coordinating Council to find ways to manage the jail population more effectively. The alternative was to build or expand the current jail, a costly alternative in a time when governments are struggling for cash.

Both efforts are working, says Bouchard.

Changes in state law allowed for early releases of nonviolent offenders before jail populations reached critical levels, which Bouchard called a relief valve.

"We've had no emergency overcrowding releases this year," he said. "But we have had some relief valve releases this year.

"At a certain capacity, people who have served a majority of their sentences can be turned out a little early," he said. "That preserves our bed space for violent offenders and people who need to be in jail."

Also effective, at least in Oakland County, are alternative sentences, such as tethering, work release and weekend programs.

Alternative sentences started as a pilot program in the circuit court and are slowly expanding to district courts, many of which send people to jail for offenses like minor in possession or trespassing.

"If you have a nonviolent misdemeanor, full custodial status isn't the best one," Bouchard said.

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