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Sheriff may outsource space in jails

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With its own jails nearing apacity, the Los Angeles ounty Sheriff's Department s poised to make an unprecelented request to the county oard of Supervisors: outource the incarceration of bout 500 inmates to a correclonal facility 100 miles away.

The department has negotited an up-to-$75 million conact through 2017 to house 12 inmates in dormiory-style housing in the city f Taft, in Kern County.

It is the first of four such eals being considered by the epartment. The board was et to consider the contract day, but the vote is expected be postponed to the end of e month.

Talks are pending with the ties of Shafter, Delano and oalinga.

In a letter to the board, eriff Lee Baca and county hief Executive Officer Willm Fujioka explained that alignment — which allowed e state to hand over to couns the responsibility of taining inmates with nonrious, nonviolent, nonsexl, or N3, offenses — is straing local resources.

"N3 sentences have ranged from an average of 24 months to as lengthy as 42 years," they added. "Without custody alternatives, our jail system will soon exceed its capacity."

Chief Alexander Yim, who heads the Sheriff's Department's custody division, said realignment, which started in October, now accounts for about a quarter of the county jail's current population of 19,000.

"We currently have about 5,500 N3's, and we think we're going to level off around 7,000-7,500, probably at the beginning of next year," Yim said.

"Obviously, this creates a burden on our custody environment."

The Taft Community Correctional Facility, located about 40 miles southwest of Bakersfield, originally housed inmates for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation until 2011.

It has dormitory-style housing for about 512 male inmates, as well as large rooms for hosting GED glasses, vocational programs, religious services and life-skills classes.

"The Taft CCF has agreed to adopt the Sheriff's philosophy on education-based incarceration and will ensure all programs fit this model," Baca and Fujioka wrote to the board.

They added the cost of housing inmates in Taft is cheaper than in Los Angeles County and would be paid for by the state.

The cost to jail an inmate in Taft is $60.55 per day, compared with $112.84 per day in Los Angeles County.

Under the proposed contract, Taft could receive as much as $75 million over five years, but Baca and Fujioka wrote the county could end up paying closer to $56.6 million in daily bed operating costs through 2017. There are additional expenses, however, including transportation for inmates to emergency rooms and hospitals, since Taft can provide only basic medical care.

The proposed contract will not cover the inmates' bills at those emergency rooms and hospitals, which would be covered by the Sheriff's Department.

Compare that to a $105.5 million expense over five years if the inmates were to remain housed in Los Angeles County.

Supervisor Michael Antonovich, who has steadfastly opposed realignment because the state is not bound by law to continue funding it year after year, said outsourcing would help the county deal with the influx of inmates.

"Given the fact that Gov. Jerry Brown's realignment program is overcrowding our already overcrowded jails, these community correctional facilities are a cost-effective measure to safely house inmates who belong in prison and protect public safety," Antonovich's justice deputy, Anna Pembedjian, said in an emailed statement.

Taft could take the initial batch of 260 inmates within the first two months of the deal being signed.

Yim said it was one of several tools the department is weighing to manage its jail population.

"We're looking at a myriad of things, from fire camps (where inmates would fight fires under the supervision of the Fire Department), to beds at community-based organizations, which can provide programs and treatment, to electronic monitoring devices," he said.

Mary Sutton, a spokeswoman for Californians United for a Responsible Budget or CURB, a coalition fighting prison and jail expansion, said she is "totally against" outsourcing to Taft or any other facility.

"We don't see this as anything different than jail expansion," she said. "The county is locking up too many people as it is.

"There are people sitting in the L.A. County jail for 40 days awaiting trial. Some are in for jaywalking tickets, driving while intoxicated," she added. "People incarcerated on low-level offenses would be much better served through programs outside of lockup, such as mental health programs, drug rehab, job training, or just having a roof over their heads."

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