

**WHAT COUNTY COMMISSIONERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THEIR JAIL:
THE FOUNDATION KNOWLEDGE**

by Allen R. Beck, Ph.D.

Decision making about a county jail can be a foreboding task. Many, if not most, county commissioners have never visited a jail before being elected. Some commissioners even hesitate to venture into their local jail after election. The reason for this reluctance may not be one of disinterest or disregard for responsibility, but a result of not knowing what to examine.

The common manner that jail administrators describe a jail to visitors is to provide a tour, during which some of the jobs of running the facility are explained and various inmate processing areas, living quarters, and staff offices are shown. County commissioners may be shown problems in the facility, but the key criteria by which facility operations should be assessed are not clearly articulated. Thus, the commissioner leaves the jail with an awareness of the building, but without having gained an objective assessment of the jail's operational strengths and weaknesses.

An objective assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of a jail is important to the county commissioner for several reasons. First, he or she will be called upon to make decisions about jail budgets that typically involve requests for increased funding. In considering those requests, the commissioner must make decisions about whether the request is reasonable or if an alternative should be considered. With only a cursory understanding of the jail, the commissioner must rely on the sheriff and/or jail administrator to explain why budget increases are needed. Although the commissioner may wonder if alternative ways of dealing with budget and budget-related issues are possible, those possibilities sometimes are not considered. Thus, jail budget decision making can become an uncomfortable process in which suspicions exist between the sheriff/jail administrator and county commission. Second, the commissioner should be specifically aware of the key aspects that will affect the county's, and sometimes the commission's, liability for injuries and violations of rights, which can occur in poorly run jails. Lawsuits raised by inmates are common. Thus, it is helpful for the commissioner to know if there are any significant problems in the way the jail is administered that might contribute to later legal problems. Third, the commissioner should seek information that will help him or her sort out misguided public rhetoric about jails that sometimes clouds decision making. There are communities in which commissioners have taken a misinformed, but publically popular, stand on jail issues that later had to be retracted. Ethically minded commissioners try to communicate the facts to the public in an understandable manner; however, that task is difficult if the commissioners are not knowledgeable of key aspects of jail operations.

County jails are usually administered by the county sheriff and sometimes by a separate department of county corrections. Regardless of the jail's organizational placement, commissioners cannot remove themselves from being involved in budgeting and legal issues arising from jail operations. Since the jail is usually one of the largest county expenditures, small problems in the jail often become large news items that draw county commissioners into the spotlight. Thus, the jail, in any county, is an unavoidable and prominent concern.

This article is written to provide guidance and insights for county commissioners into how their jails should operate. Armed with this information, commissioners should be able to perform initial inspection tours of their county jails. In order to clearly present the concepts in an easy to understand fashion, the information will be presented as a series of considerations. Each consideration will include an explanation of its importance, along with key concepts and issues. In several instances,

guidance is provided as to what questions the commissioner can ask and what documents should be examined. The focus of the information will be on developing a foundation of knowledge that will allow the commissioner to judge how well the jail is being operated.

Consideration 1. Is the Jail Well Maintained?

Surprisingly, a large number of this nation's jails are dirty and poorly maintained. This condition is not the same as the normal wear and tear that occurs from day-to-day usage. Rather, poor maintenance is visible as grime on the floors and walls, dirty windows, clutter, papers and announcements taped to walls, flaking paint, etc.

As a rule of thumb, poor jail maintenance is indicative of poor management. Even the poorest and oldest designed facilities can be kept clean. The manpower needed to keep the facility clean is abundant--its inmates. Lack of attention to jail cleanliness is often associated with lack of attention to other essential operations in running a jail.¹

Dirt and grime do not help to create a punitive environment that induces offenders to stay out of jail. Since many live in homes that are dirty, the existence of dirt is not punishing. Rather, dirt indicates that inmates are not being required to do very much. There is no lesson to be learned by inmates by induced laziness. Certainly, they will not have been exposed to attitudes toward cleanliness or work that might positively affect their lives.

Dirt and grime also affect jail staff. Jail staff in well managed, clean jails tend to exhibit a sense of pride in their work. In dirty facilities, staff more often convey a feeling of dislike for their work and antagonism toward inmates.

In a rare instance, the commissioner may find that the county is paying for a professional janitorial company to clean the jail. This practice raises the issue of the best use of funds for jail operations. If sufficient labor exists in the inmate population, why should scarce jail funds be used for day-to-day housekeeping, such as mopping and buffing floors?

County commissioners should accept no excuses from a jail administrator or sheriff for a dirty jail. As much pressure as possible should be put on the jail administrator and sheriff to clean up the facility. Of course, the desirable path of action is to discuss the issue in private to see if action can be spurred on informally. Open discussion of the issue in board meetings should be approached when informal communication has failed. Of course, the existence of a dirty facility should also raise the concern that other aspects of operations are not being closely attended to. This red flag should spur the commissioner to probe further into jail operations to determine if the county's liability and safety of staff and inmates are affected by poor practices in other areas.

In some communities, a grand jury is annually empaneled to review jail operations. Such a body has legal authority for reviewing jail operations that may not be possible by citizen committees formed by the county commission. When available, a grand jury can be a valuable tool to help improve jail conditions. However, even grand juries are limited in their level of influence, as can be seen in several counties in which the sheriffs have ignored grand jury reports about dirty conditions and jail staff rationalize away issues of cleanliness and sloppy jail management practices. If faced with such a situation, the astute county commissioner will not relent and, thereby, tacitly accept poor jail management, but continue to press the issue in various manners whenever possible.

¹ Keep in mind that clean jails can also have poor management. However, having a dirty jail is like waving the flag of poor management. It is more quickly brought to attention.

Consideration 2. What Facility Problems Affect Operations?

In terms of liability for safety of staff and inmates, the county commission is likely to share a larger portion of responsibility for problems stemming from facility deficiencies than it would for how the sheriff manages other jail operations.

Many jails have physical plant problems as a result of their high rate of wear and tear. High maintenance is a given condition with jail operations. However, the issues of facility problems that should raise red flags for the county commissioner are those that affect security, health, and safety.

There are three ways of finding out about facility problems. The first is to ask the jail administrator, during a jail tour, if there are any facility deterioration problems that affect the health and safety of inmates and/or staff. Examples of facility deterioration include inoperable security cameras and plumbing that is not functioning properly.

A second way of finding out about facility problems is to examine the facility inspection reports, e.g., the fire marshal's inspection report and the health department's food service inspection report. Such inspections should have been performed by relevant county or state officials on a routine basis and copies should be available from the jail administrator.

The third way is to ask the jail administrator, during the tour, to point out design problems that affect security and how the jail staff have modified procedures to cope with the problems. For example, some older jails have cells that cannot be easily observed because of remoteness or barriers to observation. One Idaho jail administrator, whose jail was the subject of a lawsuit, instituted the procedure of requiring a correctional officer to perform an observational walk-through of the remote cell areas every 15 minutes and to sign a simple log noting the time of the walk-through and the officer's name. Such modifications of procedures, however, often come with a cost. In some jails, increasing the frequency of observational walk-throughs may increase the staffing requirements of the facility. Some jails are so staff-frugal that increasing the work assignments of one position may mean that another task must be dropped or must be performed by someone else. In a jail, the domino effect of reassigning tasks cannot be accomplished many times without causing major security problems in some area from which staff have been withdrawn.

Other design deficiencies include complexity of pathways to cells, e.g., number of doors that have to be passed through, narrowness of passageways, areas that are too small or left out of the design, or areas eliminated due to the need to use the space for other purposes. As in the example of the Idaho jail, the commissioner should ask if design problems are present and what has been done to compensate for the problem. Of course, the county commissioner should not be expected to know what specific security practices should be in place. On the other hand, the commissioner should not be too quick to dismiss problems or solutions as being adequate. The best rule of thumb, in instances in which the commissioner suspects that a security or safety issue might still exist, is to seek the opinion of an outside expert, many of whom will not charge for their advice. For example, many state departments of corrections have jail inspection teams. In other states, the sheriff's association can provide an outside opinion. The key to remember is that, in terms of liability, the commissioner has the responsibility to be informed of serious problems and if appropriate steps have been taken to compensate for problems. The liability of the commission, of course, is the highest when facility problems could have been remedied through the budgetary process.

Consideration 3. Does the Jail Have Adequate Staffing?

Jail staffing has been one of the first victims of lean fiscal times across the country. During the last 15 years of growth in jail populations, jail staff have often been targeted for cost cutting. As a result, many jails are significantly understaffed.²

The condition of understaffing is detectable in two ways: (1) the amount of overtime given to jail staff and (2) the number of jail posts that are inadequately covered. In evaluating overtime, it may be acceptable to incur overtime when special events occur, such as special training programs that occur on an infrequent basis which involve a number of jail staff. However, overtime that frequently occurs to support normal operations puts the county at risk in the instance of legal action and/or safety of jail staff and inmates. Frequent overtime may also contribute to increased use of sick leave. In a more serious form, overtime may thwart the use of vacation time. Some counties come close to skirting the issue of wage and hour regulations. Unionization and high staff turnover also are frequently encountered when staff feel that the demands of jail work hours are too great.

In addition to the use of overtime, the most common manner of dealing with understaffing is to leave jail posts uncovered.³ In times of emergency, such as when a disturbance occurs in another part of the facility, staff may be pulled from jail posts to respond. Thus, temporary absence from one or more posts may occur. Removing staff from jail posts is not the same as deciding to use fewer staff to mow county properties. The result of that action may be longer grass on the county courthouse yard; however, the result of using fewer jail staff to cover jail posts is an increase of the risk of harm to staff and inmates.

The risk of harm is greater than many county commissioners might suspect. In nearly every state, one or more jails can be found that have been successfully sued in the instance that an inmate committed suicide. Small jails are particularly at risk, because a shortage of just one or two jail officers can drastically affect the ability to properly monitor inmates.

In some relatively small sheriff's departments, jail staffing needs are met by pulling officers from road patrol. Typically, late night patrol officers vanish first. Often this is not published by the sheriff, but the arrangement lowers the level of service to county residents. An unexpected fallout of this arrangement is that road officers tend to be unhappy working in the jail. There are personality and attitudinal differences in officers hired to work as road deputies and those employed as correctional officers. Road officers often see working in the jail as punitive. In fact, some misguided sheriffs use the jail as a place to assign officers who have failed to meet personal conduct expectations during road patrol. This negative policy contributes to the development of inappropriate, punitive attitudes of correctional staff toward inmates.

The reduction of jail staff, in jails above 100 beds, is best accomplished through an objective study of jail posts, preferably by someone trained in post analysis. As the size of the jail increases, the time and expense of the study will increase. The analysis would examine, for example, how to reschedule activities so as to require fewer correctional officers to provide oversight and how to adequately

² Staffing adequacy is also affected by turnover. That issue, however, is sometimes complex and, therefore, not selected as a consideration in the familiarization of new county commissioners with their local jail.

³ Generally defined, a jail post is a specific job assigned to a location within a jail. A correctional officer is a type of job. A control center at which a correctional officer works is a post.

compensate for fewer staff through use of electronic surveillance. If an analysis is truly objective, the commission must keep in mind that the analysis could recommend adding staff to the jail if jail posts are understaffed.

In a small jail, staffing requirements could be examined in concert with the sheriff or jail administrator. Caution is urged though not to ignore the analysis of the jail administrator and impose reductions arbitrarily. Safety of staff and inmates should take precedence over budget problems, and other non-jail avenues should be sought to balance the county budget.

There are also ways to reduce the demand for jail beds and, thereby, the number of posts that must be covered. Those strategies are discussed in other articles by this writer.

Consideration 4. Does the Jail Have Adequate Written Policies and Procedures?

Well run jails are highly structured in how they operate. The goal of an effective jail administrator is to supervise inmates and manage the many logical activities of jail operations in a consistent, safe, cost-effective, and constitutionally acceptable manner. This cannot be accomplished if comprehensive, detailed policies and procedures do not exist.

Jail operations are particularly sensitive to biases of people who work in them. Without comprehensive, detailed policies and procedures, personal approaches to dealing with inmates or providing services can vary enormously. For example, in some jails, officers can be found who have the proverbial chip on their shoulder. They are short-tempered and often cause as much inmate unrest as they subdue. Such behavior on the part of officers would be unacceptable in well run jails that have set expectations for staff behavior and methods for managing inmates.

In considering the needs of inmate management, the commissioner must keep in mind the constitutional and civilized aspects of running a jail. Jails house both unsentenced and sentenced people. Some of those unsentenced persons will not be found guilty of a crime. Therefore, constitutionally granted freedoms must be safeguarded and restricted only as necessary to ensure that the individual appears for trial and that he or she remains crime-free until trial. Punishment of the accused is not part of a civil society. It is reserved only for those found guilty of crimes.

For those detainees who are found guilty of a crime, their confinement must abide by a variety of court-tested principles, such as the prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. Generally, this means that in jail the individual is not to be exposed to threats against personal safety or psychological abuses at the hands of jailers or other inmates. These expectations of personal safety and protection from abuse, of course, are also fundamental elements of a decent work environment for jail staff. There is a saying in correctional work that poorly run facilities are also punitive to staff in terms of unnecessary risk of harm and abuse of their self-esteem.

In examining the policies and procedures governing jail operations, the commissioner can examine the following aspects. First, a central notebook should contain all of the policies and procedures. This should be a three-ring notebook. The policies and procedures should appear in separate sections. Each major policy and/or procedure should be elaborated on a separate page or set of pages. Well written procedures will contain a title and a breakout of the "who, what, when, where, and how" to conduct the procedural activities.

Second, evidence should exist that the policies and procedures are kept up to date. If no policy or procedure can be found that has been revised or dated within the last year, there is a possibility that attention to consistency in jail operations is slipping. Rarely are jail operations static. A change in some element of operations can be expected at least every year.

Third, relevant elements of the policies and procedures should appear in training and literature provided to inmates. This aspect is somewhat difficult for the county commissioner to assess during the initial jail visit; however, the commissioner can ask questions about how the policies and procedures are used. For example, the translation of policies and procedures into consistent action can only occur if they are addressed in staff training. Training of new officers should include a requirement for the study of the policies and procedures. In addition, periodic in-service training should review the policies and procedures. Also, when changes are made to the policies and procedures, relevant jail staff should be informed of these changes. In some jails, staff are required to sign a form maintained in the notebook or in training records that they have read and understand the policies and procedures.

The jail's rules and regulations specified in literature given or read to inmates, i.e., the inmate handbook, should be reflected in the policies and procedures. Differences between what is told to inmates and provided to staff in training should not be found.

Fourth, the policies and procedures should be comprehensive. The degree of comprehensiveness can be readily assessed by asking if the jail has based their policies and procedures on the American Correctional Association's (ACA) Standards for Adult Detention Facilities or on the state's suggested jail standards, if such exist.⁴ ACA's standards comprehensively identify what should be covered in a facility's policies and procedures. In order to gain insight into the contents of adequate policies and procedures, some of the recommended inclusions as identified by ACA's standards are presented below. Due to the extensive coverage of the standards and space limitations of this article, only a few of the topical areas are broken out into subcategories.

1. Personnel Policies
 - a. Recruitment and promotion.
 - b. Job descriptions.
 - c. Employee-management relations, including disciplinary procedures and grievance and appeals procedures.
2. Fiscal Management
 - a. Accounting procedures for petty cash, signature control on checks, purchasing, and methods of writing budgets.
 - b. Inventory control.
 - c. Inmate commissary and funds.
3. Training and Staff Development
 - a. Training plan.
 - b. Use of force, firearms, and chemical agents.
4. Security and Control
 - a. Inmate counts.
 - b. Inmate movement.
 - c. Use of restraints.
 - d. Written rules of inmate conduct.
 - e. How to conduct disciplinary actions.

⁴ American Correctional Association, *Standards for Local Adult Detention Facilities*. Lanham, MD: American Correctional Association, 1991 with updates. A copy of these standards can be obtained by calling 1-800-222-5646.

5. Inmate Rights
 - a. Access to law library.
 - b. Protection from harm.
 - c. Freedom in personal grooming.
 - d. Grievance procedures.
6. Safety and Emergency Procedures
7. Special Management
8. Food Service
9. Sanitation and Hygiene
10. Health Care
11. Social Services, e.g., counseling
12. Release
13. Academic Education
14. Recreation
15. Mail, Telephone, and Visiting
16. Library
17. Religious Programs

A few jail administrators and sheriffs seek ACA accreditation. This accreditation involves a thorough review of all jail operations and incorporates ACA standards within the accreditation criteria. Thus, in those instances, a commissioner can feel more assured that policies and procedures will be adequate.

Some states, such as Texas, have well-developed state jail standards. A few other states have developed standards that are meager in comparison to the ACA's recommended standards. Thus, the presence of state standards does not automatically ensure that coverage of policies and procedures is adequate.

Generally, the presence of state standards implies that a process of jail inspections exists. Copies of the jail inspection reports can be requested by the commissioner. Those reports will point out the deficiencies in operations and of the facility about which the commissioner should be aware.

If, upon review of jail operations, the commissioner finds that significant weaknesses exist in the jail's policies and procedures, he or she should consider a course of action similar to that suggested in Consideration 1, when a dirty facility is encountered.

Consideration 5. Is the Jail Budget Clearly Defined?

Decision making about the county jail budget is one of the most important and, sometimes, the most difficult task facing a county commissioner. Not only is an accurate jail accounting system an important element in supporting the annual decision making about jail budgets, but it is critical when considering alternatives for reducing jail costs and use of out-of-county housing for inmates.

Surprisingly, many counties cannot identify the true cost of jail operations. This is often due to the sloppiness in accounting practices or in the manner in which various expense categories are set up. In one relatively large Southern county that had a 300-bed jail, a new sheriff and highly skilled accountants struggled for months trying to clarify jail budget line items. Sloppy accounting practices of the previous sheriff's administration had perpetuated a system in which only a general idea of budget categories and expenditures could be provided.

Even when fairly adequate accounting practices are employed, conditions often creep into billing and timekeeping practices that confuse the budget. For example, electrical expenses are often billed by the utility company in a single statement, because a single electrical meter serves both the jail and all of the other sheriff's offices, e.g., investigations, dispatch, and road patrol. Thus, the cost of electrical services for a jail often cannot be accurately determined. Another common contributor to budget confusion arises when a sheriff uses road patrol officers to transport inmates to other facilities or to escort them to court, etc. Such crossover staff assignments will hide the true cost of jail staffing, unless an effective time accounting system is employed.⁵

Simple accounting systems may not clearly indicate how some items in the jail are being consumed. For example, if a jail administrator decides to change over to a new style of inmate uniforms and records the cost as a bulk purchase for that year, the average daily cost of housing inmates may be distorted for that year. This manner of accounting would reflect a jump in the average daily cost of housing inmates in that year, followed by a drop the next year, as few, if any, uniforms would be purchased.⁶ Then as several years pass, the annual cost of uniform replacement would increase until a fairly stable replacement rate would be reached. At that point, when the replacement rate becomes fairly steady, the average daily cost to house inmates most accurately represents the actual cost. Thus, the average cost of housing inmates could fluctuate, depending on how the jail allocates the expenses of certain types of purchases.

In some counties, revenues generated by the jail are not returned to the jail budget, but are placed in the county's general fund. This rule may have originated from the decision to prohibit law enforcement agencies from using the writing of tickets as a means of supplementing the budget. The extension of this rule to jail operations means that, if a sheriff takes the innovative step of charging inmates for their housing in a work release facility, the cost-savings in operational expenses are not appropriately reflected in the cost of jail operations. It is possible that inmate housing fees could partially offset the cost of operations, i.e., staff and materials, in a new work release unit. However, under the general fund payment rule, an annual budget request could not show any offsetting revenues, only budget increases would be shown. Thus, the county commission may not factually deal with the real cost of the work release program, i.e., some commissioners may take the position that if the numbers are not reflected in the budget, they do not exist in their budget considerations.

Such accounting problems can lead to misinformation about the budget, such as underestimating the jail budget and the average daily cost of housing inmates. It is possible that a jail, which appears to be cost-efficient when compared to other jails, could be found to be more costly when accounting practices are corrected. The problem of understating the budget may be magnified in the event that a new jail is planned and budget items, such as staff expenses, are part of the projection of new facility

⁵ Other examples of common accounting problems include the failure to separate law enforcement and jail supplies, such as gasoline for vehicles, forms used by sheriff's deputies in law enforcement activities and forms used only for jail operations, and ammunition. In addition, jail staff are sometimes provided meals during their duty day. The rationale for this is that it maintains staff availability during the day, as staff would not be leaving the building to eat. If the cost of staff meals is not separated out, the cost calculation of inmate meals will be inflated.

⁶ In the first year of purchase, the uniforms would have a value in the calculation of the average daily inmate housing cost. In the second year's calculation, the value of uniforms would have zero value in the calculation, even though each inmate would be required to wear a uniform.

operational costs. What could happen then is that functions which were informally performed by road patrol officers, e.g., transportation, could be formally specified in the new budget as the duties of jail officers. Thus, the number of staff required for a new jail takes a surprising leap.

The astute commissioner will ask questions of the jail administrator and jail clerk/accountant about how such things as crossover staff assignments are handled and what other accounting challenges exist. The county auditor's opinion should also be sought of how well the jail accounting process is being performed in the jail. Of course, the annual budget review and approval process offers a time for further exploration of the jail budget; however, the process is often too rushed to afford much time for exploration of accounting accuracy.

Remedies to improve the jail accounting system include examining the adequacy of accounting practices and software used in the jail. Outside resources that might be used to assist the jail administrator include the National Institute of Corrections Partnership Training Program seminar on "Jail Resource Management" (budgeting and related topics) and private consultants.⁷

Consideration 6. Does the Jail Have an Objective Inmate Classification System?

Jail classification is used to make decisions about where to place an inmate within the jail. For example, an offender with a history of violent acts who is in for assaulting a law enforcement officer would obviously be placed in a higher custody housing area than a nonviolent, first time offender sentenced to 30 days jail time on a bad check charge. The first inmate would be classified as a maximum custody inmate, and the latter inmate might be classified as a minimum custody inmate.

Although inmate classification may seem to be an obscure issue to the county commissioner, it is one of the "at-a-glance" indicators that can quickly provide cues about the quality of jail administration. Knowledge of the jail administrator about objective inmate classification methods is indicative of the level of familiarity with best practices in jail management. A jail administrator who knows little about objective jail classification is essentially an unformed person whose depth of knowledge about inmate management may be seriously deficient. This concept is so important that it should be considered as one of the key questions asked in job interviews for the hiring of a jail administrator.

The two most common types of jail inmate classification systems are subjective and objective classifications.⁸ Subjective jail classification relies on the opinion of staff to decide where to place an inmate in jail and what level of oversight to provide. Although subjective systems usually consider the inmate's offense and criminal history, the manner of deciding their importance is a matter of opinion.

This writer interviewed an experienced inmate classification officer who was using the subjective method. When asked how he dealt with criminal history information, he retorted that the inmate criminal history was not available for classification, but that inmates did not lie to him. As is obvious from such statements, subjective classification systems vary according to who is interviewing inmates

⁷ Contact information for the Jail Division of the National Institute of Corrections: www.nicic.org, phone: (800) 995-6423.

⁸ Essentially, there are four general types of inmate classification systems that could be applied in a jail: Subjective Classification, Objective Classification, Decision Trees, and Psychometric Test-Style systems.

and making the judgments.

Subjective systems represent the old thinking about classification and sometimes reflect “non-thinking” administration. Subjective classification is a non-thinking choice of jail administrators in instances that they found the system in place when they took the job and have not bothered to see if anything better exists. Such non-thinking administrators often do not strive to improve much in jail administration. Old accounting and security practices continue unchanged.

Subjective classification systems are expensive, because they tend to overclassify inmates as needing higher custody housing than necessary. For example, in the many jail studies conducted by this writer, subjective systems have been found to place greatly more inmates in maximum and medium custody categories than necessary. In very small jails, this error may make no difference in where inmates are placed. How the practice gets to be expensive is when a new jail is to be built. Jail staff will usually specify that a higher ratio of maximum and medium custody cells are needed than is calculated through an objective jail classification system. Since high custody cells are more expensive to build than lower custody housing, this error in classification is costly.

Just as subjective classification symbolizes old thinking about inmate management, objective classification reflects the evolution of thinking in inmate management. The most widely accepted objective classification system, the Objective Jail Classification (OJC), was developed under sponsorship of the National Institute of Corrections. The OJC is based on a rating system in which current and past criminal history, substance abuse, and personal stability are considered. The system includes an initial rating and a reclassification at a subsequent time with consideration for behavior while in jail. From a legal standpoint, the OJC does not discriminate due to prejudices of jail staff. The OJC is also acknowledged as a benchmark in the field of correctional management by the American Jail Association, National Correctional Association, and National Institute of Corrections. Subjective classification systems are frowned upon.

During the initial tour of a jail facility, the county commissioner can ask questions about what type of inmate classification system is used. Unless the jail is small, less than 50 beds, objective jail classification should have been considered. If the jail administrator has not studied information on objective jail classification, or worse yet, has not heard of the National Institute of Corrections, which sponsors the OJC, there is cause for concern about jail management. Definitely, if the jail has 100 beds or more, there should be scant justification for not using the OJC. Also, there is much reason to be concerned about the quality of jail administration in managing inmates.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

How a newly elected county commissioner develops a useful understanding of the county’s jail can be a challenging task. This is not a topic usually covered in materials available to the new county commissioner. Given that the county jail is one of the most expensive budget items in a county budget, if not the most expensive, it is essential that the commissioner be able to make informed decisions about jail issues. In beginning the self-education process, the commissioner should take a tour of the jail. By examining the six indicators identified in this article, a meaningful first impression of jail operations can be developed.

1. Is the jail well maintained?
2. Are there facility problems that affect security, safety, and health of staff and inmates?
3. Does the jail have adequate staffing?
4. Does the jail have adequate written policies and procedures?

5. Is the jail budget clearly defined?
6. Does the jail have an objective inmate classification system?

These six considerations are drawn from the author's experience of having visited more than a hundred county jails and studying at least thirty problem jails in depth. Typically, if the jail fails to pass the considerations involving practices and procedures in jail operations, the commissioner should pursue pressing for improvement. Four of the best ways of seeking immediate improvement include the following:

1. Hiring a competent jail administrator, or
2. Sending the current administrator to training courses offered by the American Jail Association and National Institute of Corrections⁹, or
3. Seeking technical assistance from the National Institute of Corrections, or
4. Hiring a consulting firm that specializes in jail management to assist.

All of the alternatives for improving jail management will require the commissioner to interact with the sheriff and to come to a consensus that improvement is needed. If the concern for improvement is tied to the budget process or to the construction of a new jail, etc., there may be a greater incentive for action.

Of the six considerations, the new commissioner must acknowledge that previous decisions of the county board may have affected the second and third considerations, facility problems and staffing adequacy. If that has been the case, the new commissioner should seek to further understand the issues, so that a persuasive strategy can be developed to remedy the problems. The minimum response to improving jail management is to help the jail administrator and staff obtain training. This training should not be confused with the training that is sometimes mandated by the state. That training usually pertains to fundamental knowledge and skills required of jail staff, not to the six considerations addressed in this article. Accounting practices, for example, are not generally covered in such training.

In addition to the six considerations described above, the new commissioner should determine if the state performs inspections of the jail. If it does, he or she should obtain copies of the reports for the last several years. In reading the reports, the commissioner should keep in mind that some states are very limited in the range of issues that are inspected. Thus, a good inspection report does not automatically mean that all issues, such as adequacy of accounting systems, have been examined.

Since problems that occur in the jail can result in lawsuit awards that come from the county budget, and sometimes include the county commission as parties to the suit, the responsible county commissioner cannot afford to accept that the jail is only the sheriff's concern. Armed with the six considerations, the new commissioner can, at least, "take the temperature" of jail operations to see if problems are likely to exist.

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⁹ Both of these organizations have web sites that provide contact information.

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