

County jail population down nearly 25% during pandemic

By ALEX CASTLE
STAFF WRITER

Population at the Umatilla County Jail in Pendleton has dropped nearly 25% from its usual daily average since the COVID-19 pandemic has led to more conditional releases, fewer people being booked into jail and a majority of court proceedings being put on hold.

According to Umatilla County Sheriff Terry Rowan, the jail's daily population has hovered around 160 in recent weeks, which is a decrease of about 50 people from the usual daily average of 212.

The reduction is the result of a combination of efforts to reduce the risk of the virus spreading through the close-quartered facility, including local law enforcement showing greater discretion when deciding to arrest or cite someone.

"I really appreciate local law enforcement for stepping up and being a part of the solution," Rowan said.

Agencies and departments from Morrow County to Walla Walla County house individuals at the Umatilla County Jail, and so each has played a role in the reduced population.

Those efforts were coupled with Rowan and his jail



Inmates are processed in the intake area on the Umatilla County Jail in October 2018 in Pendleton. Population at the jail has dropped since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out.

HH file photo

staff evaluating its population at the onset of the outbreak and each person in custody who was already at an elevated risk to COVID-19 because they're over 60 years old or have underlying health conditions.

Rowan said eight people who fit the criteria were identified, and two of them have been released. Another was transported to a mental health facility where he could receive treatment and be at a lower risk, while the

other five remain in custody.

Other conditional releases have been granted after a standard evaluation of the severity of charges currently being held on, criminal history and history of appearing for scheduled court dates.

While the local jail population began to decline weeks ago, *The Oregonian* reported last week that Gov. Kate Brown had requested information from county officials about the potential

early release of inmates in state prisons. According to a Friday report, 3,244 prisoners were identified as potential early release candidates due to age, health conditions or time remaining on their sentence.

As the state evaluates reducing its own prison population, any releases are unlikely to be followed by more reductions at the Umatilla County Jail.

"At this time, we don't have plans for any additional

releases," Rowan said.

In the event that an inmate is suspected of being sick, Rowan said they have some segregation units, which are usually utilized for disciplinary functions, or for inmates with mental health conditions and or going through detox, where inmates could be quarantined.

Umatilla County District Attorney Dan Primus and his office have also played a role in the reduction

efforts by closely evaluating bail amounts and conditional releases for those facing lesser charges for crimes like misdemeanor thefts, drug possession or failing to appear in court.

"We're trying to do our part to balance the public health concerns with the public safety concerns," Primus said.

Court proceedings have ceased for any defendant that isn't currently in custody, Primus said, which accounts for a majority of cases. According to him, less than 40 people currently at the jail are awaiting trials, nearly all of whom are charged with Measure 11 crimes.

Measure 11 crimes include murder, manslaughter and sex abuse and carry mandatory minimum sentences without possibility for early release.

But while most cases are put on hold for the moment, defendants still have a constitutional right to a speedy trial. That right is often waived in order for the defense to prepare its case, but Primus is concerned about the potential health risks if they don't.

"What are we going to do when we actually need to bring a jury in?" Primus said.

Pandemic complicates court-ordered community service

By JADE MCDOWELL
NEWS EDITOR

For anyone with court-ordered community service hours to complete, it hasn't been easy to find opportunities in the age of social distancing.

Usually, people can get their hours in at nonprofits such as the Agape House or PAWS.

But Dawn Skinner, supervisor at Umatilla County Community Corrections, said many agencies are not currently taking volunteers in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to comply with Governor Kate Brown's executive order for everyone to stay home as much as possible.

Salvation Army's thrift store is currently closed, for example, and Hermiston's community garden has delayed its opening in order to keep people away from the Good Shepherd Health Care System campus where the garden is located.

"Everyone's kind of in the same situation at the moment," Skinner said.

She said some places may still be taking volunteers, and people are welcome to check, but she is hesitant to tell people that's what they have to do, since everyone should be reducing their time spent in public right now.

For people who still have a lot of time left on

"THE COURT HAS BEEN PRETTY FORGIVING."

Dawn Skinner, supervisor at Umatilla County Community Corrections

their deadline to complete all their hours, Skinner said she's telling them "not to stress about it" for now.

For people who are coming up on their deadline and still need to complete more hours, she has been directing them to talk to the court, which has the authority to make accommodations.

"The court has been pretty forgiving," she said.

Skinner said, like everyone, Umatilla County Community Corrections has been making adjustments to enforce social distancing in its buildings.

Since March 19, all county offices have been closed to visitors, with staff available over the phone and by appointment when necessary. Community Corrections can be reached at 541-276-7482.

Hermiston Police Department gets a new set of wheels

HERMISTON HERALD

The Hermiston Police Department has a new crime mobile.

The department has retrofitted a 2001 Dodge diesel as a crime scene vehicle stocked with equipment for the department to collect evidence at large or complicated crime scenes, according to a Facebook post from the department.

The enclosed truck can

also be used during warrant sweeps or as a mobile command post.

According to the post by Lieutenant Randy Studebaker, the department got an "amazing deal" on the vehicle from Umatilla Electric Cooperative.

The truck was in good mechanical condition, he said, but it no longer served UEC's purpose for it.

"We're thankful for our partnership with UEC, and

we anticipate this vehicle will be in service with us for many years," he wrote.

The department was previously planning on using a retired ambulance donated by Umatilla County Fire District #1, but that vehicle met an unfortunate end when it was parked at a mechanical shop awaiting repairs when a driver lost control and crashed into it at "highway speeds." The ambulance was totaled.

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PET OF THE WEEK

Troubles is a sweet senior. She is approx. 12 years old. Great with dogs, fine with cats. Has skin allergies and takes Apoquel for it. She absolutely loves people and loves to snuggle. She is looking for a comfortable home to retire to.

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