

Researchers suggest ways counties can cut jails costs

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In a single month in 2009, sheriff's deputies in four counties spent nearly 2,600 work hours driving jail inmates to court, doctors' offices and elsewhere, which cost the taxpayers of Orange, Ulster, Rockland and Dutchess at least \$600,000 in deputy pay alone.

How can counties reduce that road time? How about holding certain court appearances in jail or linking inmates with judges by videoconferencing? How about creating a regional bus ride for inmates headed to Downstate Correctional Facility in Fishkill to begin their state prison terms?

Those are few questions SUNY New Paltz researchers raise in a recent report suggesting ways that seven Hudson Valley counties can lower their jail costs by sharing services and space, harnessing new technology or simply departing from tradition.

The report by SUNY's Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach came with a separate analysis of the deteriorating Sullivan County Jail, which poses the most pressing problem. County officials there have discussed replacing the 104-year-old jail — the state's oldest — since 1989 but remain leery of the cost, which is now estimated to be at least \$75 million.

The Sullivan study, written by Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress, suggests the county lower that price by shrinking its plans, and offers several possible ways to do so. One is contracting to board some of its inmates in Orange County's excess space. Another is lowering its inmate population through jail alternatives such as electronic monitoring.

Orange and Ulster counties both have new jails — they were completed in 2001 and 2007 — with more than enough room. Indeed, Orange County already collects more than \$5 million a year by boarding federal immigration detainees and inmates from other counties in its 753-bed jail, the region's largest.

And yet the report suggests that all seven counties in the study, however well-equipped, stand to benefit from new approaches and collaboration with their neighbors.

For example, the authors, research associate Joshua Simons and Gerald Benjamin, the center's director, suggest opening a regional "overflow" facility for counties to use when their jails are full and to house women and juveniles, who are kept separate from other inmates, which can cause inefficient space use.

Other suggestions zero in on transportation costs. In a presentation of the report on Thursday in Goshen, Orange County Sheriff Carl DuBois described the constant demand to ferry inmates to local courts for arraignments and other court proceedings. "It's a logistical nightmare."

Benjamin said some problems have lingered for decades. "It's really time to get results."

The jail report is available online at www.newpaltz.edu/crreo/jail_study_final_report.pdf

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