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Martin Hall Juvenile Detention Facility may close

County no longer needs beds

Mike Prager
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Spokane County commissioners are pulling their funding from Martin Hall Juvenile Detention Facility in Medical Lake, a move that threatens to close the lockup that has served nine counties in Eastern Washington.

Spokane County would save \$319,000 a year at a time when commissioners are facing an annual budget squeeze.

The county no longer needs the five beds it has been paying for since 1995 when Martin Hall opened in a state-owned building at Eastern State Hospital, said Commissioner Al French, who is leading the county's pullout.

Crowding at Spokane County's main Juvenile Detention Center, adjacent to the Courthouse, has been reduced due to a greater reliance on alternatives to sentencing, including electronic monitoring.

Commissioners voted earlier this month to stop funding for Martin Hall.

"It's us taking steps to protect the taxpayers," French said. The savings will reduce budget cuts in other county services in 2013, cuts being caused by sluggish tax collections, he said.

Thirty-one staff members, including on-call workers, could lose their jobs at Martin Hall if it closes as a result of Spokane County's move, said Robert Palmquist, Martin Hall administrator.

The facility is managed under contract with Community, Counseling and Correctional Services Inc., of Butte.

The Martin Hall governing board, made up of county commissioners from the participating counties, meets today at 10 a.m. at Medical Lake City Hall to consider the next steps.

Along with Spokane, the consortium is made up of Adams, Asotin, Douglas, Ferry, Lincoln, Pend Oreille, Stevens and Whitman counties.

French said that even without Martin Hall there are enough juvenile beds in Eastern Washington to accommodate current space needs. Extra beds are available in Okanogan, Chelan, Walla Walla, Benton and Spokane counties, he said.

Spokane has seen a large reduction in the use of its juvenile detention facility because of community-oriented corrections programs. Those include a structured alternative confinement school, community service, a girls' group, evening and weekend programs and parental involvement.

The 39 beds at the Spokane facility had regularly housed 40 to 50 juveniles at a time, forcing double-bunking.

When Martin Hall opened, Spokane also was providing space for outlying small counties, and there was concern about crowding getting worse.

In 2002, the average daily juvenile detention population for Spokane County was 57, including five at Martin Hall.

In 2005, Spokane became a pilot county for a juvenile detention alternatives initiative. Now, detention is reserved for the most serious offenders, not probation violators or truants.

Since 2007, the average head count has dropped from 38 to 30 a day, said Bonnie Bush, juvenile court services administrator.

Savings on incarceration freed up money for alternative programs. "Our reform efforts are efficient and cost-effective," Bush said in an email.

The result is a safer environment in detention. For those children diverted from detention, she said, "The outcomes have been really positive."