

All eyes on security at the county

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MONTESANO — Some courthouse employees were on edge but trying to continue on with their day-to-day business on their first day back since Friday's shooting of a deputy and stabbing of Superior Court Judge Dave Edwards.

Edwards tried to lead by example, deciding to come back to work and don his robes Monday. As he entered his court room and took his seat, he was met with a standing ovation by most of those in the audience. Ever humble, Edwards nodded in appreciation but wanted to get right to business.

"It's great to be back," Edwards said. "But now our focus has got to be on courthouse security more than ever."

On Monday, Steven Daniel Kravetz made his first appearance in Grays Harbor District Court. He was arrested Saturday after a 25-hour manhunt following the shooting of Grays Harbor Deputy Polly Davin with her own gun and the stabbing of Edwards. Both sustained some injuries but are recovering.

Superior Court Judge Mark McCauley said he met with County Commission Chairwoman Terry Willis early Monday morning and insisted that courthouse security be of paramount concern.

"We can no longer wait," McCauley said after the meeting. "And Commissioner Willis said they will do something. And I believe they understand how serious this is."

But Edwards said he's concerned that the county commissioners may not be acting fast enough. Edwards said he had talked to Willis on Sunday, "and she said they would be acting immediately. But that's not what she's been saying today."

About 10 minutes into their morning meeting, Willis told fellow commissioners Mike Wilson and Herb Welch that they needed to put courthouse security on the top of their things to do.

"It's bumped to the forefront now because we're no longer talking about a 'what if' situation because we actually had the situation," Willis said.

But Willis said that the county can't just put in a metal detector or X-ray machine and hire a few extra corrections personnel without first understanding the real security needs that should be put in place. She said they need to do a more elaborate assessment of the security needs of both the courthouse and the County Administration Building.

GODFREY ORDERS MORE SECURITY

At noon, Superior Court Judge Gordon Godfrey met with Willis. Godfrey dropped off an "Order of Security" mandating that the Grays Harbor County Sheriff bolster security in the courthouse and then left the meeting.

The order mandates that a deputy be present in each courtroom of the Superior Court in Montesano and the Juvenile Detention Center at Junction City. The deputy will be present from 8 a.m. in the courtrooms and may be released at 5 p.m.

"It shall be the responsibility of said deputy to make sure that no persons in said courtrooms are in possession of any weapons and shall maintain proper decorum in said courtrooms and in the courthouse," the order reads.

Whether that means implementing a metal detector is up for interpretation.

The order states that the security shall "remain in place until a comprehensive security system is in

place at the Courthouse and the Juvenile Facility in Junction City.” And that all expenses and costs “shall be authorized as a charge upon the County.”

Judge Edwards said that he feels the county commissioners could have taken more steps to address security on Monday. For instance, the county owns a portable metal detector that could have been put in place.

Kravetz was carrying a knife or scissors he used to stab the judge and stab the officer before taking her gun. Whether that would have been caught through a screening process is anyone’s guess.

“Not all metal detectors would pick up everything that comes through,” Willis points out. “It depends on what kind of metal detector we have. I know we have a metal detector here at our disposal but I don’t know the caliber of it. Would just knowing we have a metal detector stop them from at least trying to get in or trying some other mechanism? I can’t jump to that conclusion.”

Undersheriff Rick Scott said that he added a few extra corrections officers to keep an eye on the courthouse on Monday. At one point, all of the side doors to the building were locked except for the front door. An official with the U.S. Marshals Service also planned on coming to the courthouse to provide an assessment for how the county could improve its security.

“We’re going to do what we have to do to protect our courtrooms,” Edwards said. “Both Judge McCauley and I support Judge Godfrey’s order.”

Back in July, a courthouse security committee convened by the judges turned in a list of \$300,000 worth of items and personnel the commissioners could fund to improve security at the courthouse. On Monday, McCauley asked Willis to begin implementing that plan.

But Willis said she’s hesitant to do that, “Now we need to look at the plan for a few minutes and ask: Is this what we want?”

For instance, the plan doesn’t include surveillance cameras, which could have been helpful for deputies in identifying Kravetz earlier. Willis points out if cameras had been installed outside, deputies could have seen where he went and concentrated their efforts in finding him. Kravetz had been in downtown Montesano for at least a half hour, mainly hiding in an attorney’s office.

Willis said the plan also doesn’t address security at the County Administration Building, the District Court in Aberdeen or the Juvenile Court at the detention facility at Junction City.

Why not implement the plan in phases, starting with the courthouse in Montesano?

“The judges have stated they don’t want it in phases,” Commissioner Welch replied.

“They want a comprehensive plan,” Willis agreed.

“SHAKEN AND ON EDGE”

District Court Judge Tom Copland said his staff members were coping with what happened but are “shaken and on edge.”

Clerk Cheryl Brown said her employees are doing well enough, although she wants to make sure her office’s “panic buttons” are working. Brown said she doesn’t recall the last time they were used.

Brown said that whatever security is put in place should include an alarm system to notify her office when a breach has occurred.

“Something could be happening upstairs or downstairs and we’d never know it,” Brown said.

“Everybody’s on edge,” agreed Prosecutor Stew Menefee. “We see a lot of odd people in here, but

nobody expects this to happen.”

Menefee notes that bulletproof glass protects his main office as well as the office of District Court, “but what we really need is better security — a metal detector and staff to check for weapons.”

Elma resident Anthony Overall had business at District Court on Monday and said he expected to go through metal detectors.

“There should have been better security here,” Overall said. “Not for my safety, but for the people who work here.”

Montesano attorney Vini Samuel says she’s practiced law all over the region and Grays Harbor is the only one she’s been to without a metal detector.

“There have been three serious, violent incidents here in the last three years,” Samuel said.

During Monday’s County Commission meeting, only Charles Laier of Aberdeen spoke up about the issue during the public comment period.

“The money is out there to do what you need to do to safely have this courthouse taken care of and if you don’t have that money, maybe you ought to find a bunch of timber to log so you can get it,” Laier told the commissioners. “Two more pulls of the trigger could have turned this into one hell of a tragedy, as bad as it was.”