Justice Center taking precautions to prevent COVID-19

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Skagit Valley Herald

April 1, 2020

The Skagit County Community Justice Center.

Charles Biles / Skagit Valley Herald

MOUNT VERNON — Precautions are being taken at the Skagit County Community Justice Center to protect staff and inmates from COVID-19.

So far, there have been no cases among either inmates or corrections officers, Skagit County Chief of Corrections Don Marlow said.

"We recognize we have a service which we must perform and are doing so while trying to be prudent in keeping our staff and inmates healthy," he said.

Marlow said the Skagit County Sheriff's Office, which operates the jail, has excluded visitors and has reduced the jail's population.

In February, the jail housed an average of 248 inmates, Marlow said. In March, the average was 215, including an average of 184 over the final two weeks of March.

On Tuesday, 152 inmates were being held, Marlow said.

"If we needed to isolate an infected inmate, a lower population makes that task more manageable," he said.

Lowering that number has involved efforts on multiple fronts, Marlow said.

While state law requires that those charged with certain offenses be held, jail staff are reducing the number of those held who are not charged with such offenses, he said.

Jail staff are also working with the Skagit County Prosecuting Attorney's Office and Skagit County Superior Court to get cases resolved faster, and are postponing jail sentences.

The state Department of Corrections is also reducing the number of violators of community supervision it takes into custody and places in local jails.

Gov. Jay Inslee issued a proclamation Monday that waives a requirement for an arrest after a sixth violation and allows Corrections to issue other sanctions, Inslee's office said.

The state Legislature passed a law that does the same thing, said Janelle Guthrie, communications manager for Corrections. However, that law was not to go into effect until June.

"In light of the pressures COVID-19 has put on our jails and prisons, we asked Gov. Inslee to expedite implementation of these changes," Mac Pevey, assistant secretary for the Community Corrections Division, said in a statement to the Skagit Valley Herald. "We also implemented other temporary changes in the way we supervise lower-risk formerly incarcerated in our community as a means to protect our staff, partners and those we supervise."

Aside from lowering the jail population, the Skagit County Community Justice Center is utilizing other methods to keep inmates and staff safe, and unlike other jails, including those in neighboring counties, the Justice Center's age and design are helping to do so.

Opened in 2017, the 400-bed, 100,000-square-foot facility had modern features and was built to better accommodate the county's jail population. The old jail was built to hold 83.

"Our design definitely helps us to deal with this issue as we are not overcrowded, and can isolate potential issues," Marlow said. "We have a unit dedicated to medical needs along with up-to-date air delivery systems."

Medical staff regularly screen all inmates, he said. Those who exhibit flu-like symptoms are quarantined for 14 days.

Should an inmate test positive, Marlow said the jail is equipped with two negative-airflow rooms in which the air gets directed back into the room to limit the exposure of others to an airborne disease.

The jail also has procedures in place should a deputy become ill at work, he said.

"Staff are our lifeline here at the jail," Marlow said. "Because we work in a close-knit environment, it can be challenging to accomplish social distancing, but we regularly emphasize its importance with our deputies."

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