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Jail overtime tab called unacceptable Guarding inmates at the Douglas County Jail can be a dangerous job. But it also can be very lucrative. Three Douglas County corrections officers were paid more than \$100,000 e

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Guarding inmates at the **Douglas County** Jail can be a dangerous job. But it also can be very lucrative. Three **Douglas County** corrections officers were paid more than \$100,000 last year to supervise inmates. Each of the three logged at least 900 hours in overtime, with each boosting their annual pay by \$40,000 or more.

They weren't the only officers to take home big overtime checks. A total of 24, mostly senior-level, officers each were paid more than \$20,000 in overtime last year.

It's a situation that the head of the **county** jail and some **Douglas County** Board members find unacceptable.

Corrections Director Jeff Newton said the officers didn't do anything wrong, but he'd like to make changes to rein in what he has called "spiraling" overtime.

He wants to hire more full-time officers, use part-time officers to fill staffing gaps, and negotiate changes to the officers' union contract.

County Board member Clare Duda said he doesn't fault the officers for taking on the extra shifts. "But I think it is a bad system that works an employee that many hours or pays that kind of overtime," he said.

Take the example of the **county's** top-paid officer last year.

A sergeant, a 15-year veteran of the department, earned base pay of about \$30 an hour, or more than \$62,000. On top of that, he worked

1,125 overtime hours, at about \$45 an hour. With more than \$48,000 in overtime, he boosted his pay last year to \$111,713.

County Board member Mike Boyle defended the overtime pay, saying it's fair compensation for full-time officers who dedicate their careers to the **county** and risk their personal safety.

"Full-time employees who work long hours and work overtime do so because working overtime is the difference between taking the kids to Orlando instead of Des Moines," he said.

Boyle said that if open officer positions were filled, there would be much less need for overtime.

In total, the **county** paid officers more than \$2 million in overtime in 2008. That's up nearly \$500,000 from 2007. And the jail's overtime bill has steadily climbed since 2005.

Overtime always will be needed to run the jail, which operates 24/7, said Kathy Kelley, chief administrative officer for the **county**. But the amount of overtime has become excessive, she said.

With the economic downturn, the **county** dealt this summer with a budget shortfall for the 2009-10 fiscal year.

To address it, the **county** tapped \$5 million from its reserve fund and asked departments to look for cuts.

For his part, Newton wants to address jail overtime. He told the **County** Board recently that six part-timers, each working 20 hours or fewer a week, could save the **county** about \$100,000 in overtime.

The pilot program wouldn't make a big dent in the jail's overtime bill at first, Duda said, but it's a start. "I would hope with time that we have far more than six (part-time) employees."

The proposed changes have drawn objections from the jail workers' union, the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 8. The union opposes the hiring of part-timers or any changes in how overtime is assigned. The union recently filed a lawsuit with the Nebraska Commission of Industrial Relations, a state agency that handles labor disputes, to stop the hiring of part-time officers.

The commission ruled that the **county** should maintain the status quo pending the resolution of the lawsuit. The **county** had already offered six people part-time jobs, but, in response to the ruling, offered them full-time jobs instead. A hearing in the case is scheduled for Sept. 2.

Union officials also have questioned whether bringing on

inexperienced part-timers could jeopardize safety in the jail, something the jail director disputes.

"They are not just sitting there watching Rhodes scholars," said union attorney John Corrigan. "Some of these people are really devious and dangerous."

Instead, the union wants the **county** to hire more full-time officers.

The **county** and union are currently in negotiations for a new contract. The current agreement expired June 30, though its terms will remain in effect until a new agreement is reached.

The jail officers' contract spells out how overtime is assigned at the 450,000-square-foot downtown jail, 710 S. 17th St.

Correctional officers can work up to 32 hours of overtime per week, on top of their scheduled 40-hour work week. Some overtime is mandatory, when someone is needed to fill in for a jail officer who has called in sick, for example.

But most other overtime is voluntary, including to fill in for vacations or for officers who are in training. Officers bid for time based on seniority, and that means overtime shifts often go to those earning higher hourly wages.

Newton said a major factor in recent overtime has been a rise in the **county's** inmate population.

Last June, the **Omaha** Police Department closed its jail, and those arrested are now taken directly to the **county** jail. The jail **merger** had been discussed on and off over the years. It became more pressing after a **city** jail inmate died from a bleeding ulcer.

The **county's** average daily population has been increasing since then, from 1,148 in 2008 to 1,161 this year. Last Friday, the jail set a record with 1,302 inmates in custody, Newton said. That's nearly 90 percent of the jail's capacity.

Open correctional officer positions also factored into the size of the overtime bill, Newton said. The jail currently has 346 officers on staff, but about two dozen vacant positions.

The **County** Board recently beefed up the number of jail staff that could be hired. But whether all 372 positions are filled is up to Newton and his staff and also depends on how many officers leave the **county** each month.

Boyle questioned why open positions remained unfilled last year. He

said if the jail's management filled those jobs, overtime would be reduced significantly.

"They ask for employees but then they don't hire them," Boyle said. "We're spending overtime money instead of paying for full-time people."

Newton said sometimes it's more economical to pay overtime than to hire full-time officers, who will receive benefits but may not be needed if inmate numbers drop. Historically, Newton said, the inmate population rises in the summer, but drops off in late fall and the early part of the year.

"It's a balancing act whether you hire more employees or whether you pay employees overtime," Newton said.

He said having part-time officers would help with that because they could fill in during peak times.

And, he added, the hiring process takes time.

A 20-member recruit class started a six-week training program last month. That group is scheduled to graduate at the end of August. The last 26-member recruit class graduated Jan. 2.

To be hired as a corrections officer, a candidate must have a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma, undergo a criminal background check and pass medical and drug tests.

Newton said typically two or three training classes are held a year, and a handful of officers don't make it through.

"If we have vacancies," Newton said, "it's going to take awhile to fill those positions, so you have to use overtime hours."

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