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Order begins process toward relieving jail overcrowding

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PINELLAS COUNTY – Pinellas County Sheriff Jim Coats received the go-ahead on April 17 to begin putting into place additional solutions to help relieve what is described as dangerous overcrowding conditions at the county jail.

Chief Judge David Demers, of the Sixth Circuit Court, signed the 19-page administrative order, giving Coats the authority to release certain non-violent inmates or arrestees on their own recognizance who meet a detailed set of criteria.

"It's the first step in a process," said Marianne Pasha, public information coordinator for the Sheriff's Office. "The judge's order just sets the process into motion."

Pasha said the solutions would be implemented in stages and required staff training, as well as development of procedural practices.

Officials, including Pinellas County judges, Coats, State Attorney Bernie McCabe, Public Defender Bob Dillinger, Clerk of the Circuit Court Ken Burke, incoming Chief Judge Robert Morris and other members of the Pinellas criminal justice community have been working together for the past year on a plan to address the severe overcrowding at the jail.

For the past two years, the jail population has at times exceeded 3,800 inmates when the original design was for around 2,500. Officials hope the order will help bring the capacity to a level of around 3,300, until two new facilities currently under construction are opened.

"Our intent is not to compromise public safety by using these new release guidelines," Coats said. "These individuals will still be tracked in the system. We're taking the responsibilities outlined in this order very seriously. The outcome will be a safer environment for our staff, jail inmates, attorneys who visit their clients and many others who provide services at our facility."

Pasha said overcrowding increases friction at the jail and creates more problems.

"The sheriff is responsible for the custody and safety of the people in the jail who are presumed innocent until proven otherwise, and he's also responsible for the safety of the staff."

Examples given in the judge's administrative order for inmates that might be eligible for release by the sheriff include people who might have been incarcerated for ordinance violations, misdemeanors and non-violent third degree felonies like forgery and retail theft. Others who may be eligible are those non-violent inmates sentenced to county time who have limited time remaining on their sentence.

Some inmates serving sentences for non-violent crimes may be considered for release and may wear an electronic monitoring device, a tracking strategy already used in Pinellas County.

Pasha said the order affects the booking process and the bond process. She said it also involves municipal police departments and the judicial system.

"A strong sense of cooperation between all parties will be needed," she said.

Pasha said that the jail population fluctuates on a daily basis and that it fluctuates in the different areas. She said population numbers are reviewed three times a day. She said the program was not designed as a quick fix to alleviate overcrowding issues.

No target number of inmates for release exists, Pasha said. She said each release would be decided on a case-by-case basis. She said there were no plans to go in and release multiple inmates in any particular area of the jail.

"This is a process that will allow us to bring down the jail population over time," she said. "The sheriff takes his responsibility very seriously ..."

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