



Shelby County Sheriff's Office

Floyd Bonner, Jr., Sheriff

October 17, 2025

Honorable Charlie Caswell, Jr.
Shelby County Board of Commissioners
160 N. Main, Suite 600
Memphis, Tennessee 38103

RE: Jail Conditions

Dear Commissioner Caswell:

Your correspondence of October 15, 2025 was addressed to Sheriff Bonner and Chief Deputy Buckner, and hoped it found us and our families in good health. Unfortunately, that is not the case for the Sheriff as his father has passed away and his service is Saturday.

We do not want to disturb him during this most difficult time so I have been asked to respond to you due to the urgency of the situation.

We are grateful that you recognize that our warnings to the Shelby County Board of Commissioners about the Jail and our need for additional funding in light of the impending arrival of the Memphis Safe Task Force were well founded.

Once we learned of the Task Force's plans, we began working non-stop to address and minimize the impact that increased arrests would have on the Jail. The Sheriff, Chief Deputy Buckner and I have been in meetings for weeks with national and State leadership to address the problems we have foreseen.

We immediately began working with other agencies to place our residents in their facilities. That continues. We have made repairs to some sites to accommodate our residents. We have looked at, and continue to look at, various locations to see if they could be adapted to our needs. In fact, we asked to use the County-owned vacant Commercial Appeal building but were told that it was being demolished. We are working directly with the Governor's Office and the Commissioner of Corrections and they have taken over 200 convicted prisoners from our facility so far in their on-going efforts to support us.



201 POPLAR AVENUE, 9TH FLOOR, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE 38103



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We have met with our judiciary, the Public Defender, the District Attorney General's office, the Clerks, and others to discuss what was coming and to ask for their assistance with the population. Of course, the work of retired Judge Bobby Carter, our contract Population Management Coordinator, is on-going.

It is very disheartening that individuals who have had no role in this process are speculating publicly about what has or has not been done.

Please let me underscore for you: creating spaces and moving residents is a high-stakes security matter. You may recall when Davidson County's jail was being built, a man infiltrated the construction site and planted guns, ammunition and tools inside the building. That man is now in prison.

Weeks ago, your Board was told that the Jail intake area was overcrowded, people were sleeping in chairs, and that additional funding was needed to properly staff it to address the influx of arrestees. The Jail has been using overtime to address intake and release for weeks. Clerk Sawyer advised the Board of her funding needs in order to properly staff the area. We cannot speak to the situation with Pre-Trial Services. Likewise, we cannot speak to the issues of the medical provider, Wellpath, which the Mayor's Administration selected and contracted with. It appears Wellpath is doing its best to bring in sufficient staff during this critical time.

It is not helpful when unsubstantiated claims are made. For example, every person coming into the Jail is observed and questioned by a nurse. Once accepted into the Jail, every person has an intake screening with a nurse in the intake area. There are two (2) medical screening rooms in the intake area so there are always nurses present. Within fourteen (14) days, every resident has a full health assessment.

The story you related about the diabetic individual who never saw a nurse in four (4) days would be alarming, if it were true. If you could please provide the name of the individual we can pull the records to see what happened. It would be best if he would sign a release allowing access to his medical records so that could be fully reported.

There have been no deaths in the Jail since July. Again, it is not helpful when elected officials repeat unsubstantiated claims which are designed to lead people to believe there are "cover-ups." It is also disappointing because the Sheriff's Office has demanded autopsies in all deaths where people either died in custody or had recently been released from custody. Years ago, it took the assistance of the County Attorney to require the

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Medical Examiner to perform those autopsies. It is routine now because the Sheriff's Office wants to have full knowledge of the causes of death and to report in an honest and transparent way what has happened. Not all agencies do that but this agency has always done so, even when it was not required.

The large population in the Jail comes at a time when we are rebuilding our staffing. The PR firms hired to help recruiting for corrections and law enforcement have paid off. We have made many changes to our hiring processes to accelerate them and we often have several corrections recruit classes in training at the same time. We are streamlining as much as possible to accommodate the population increase.

Your Board has heard many times about the escalators and elevators not working in the Jail. Repairs are being made but they are not operational on all 6 floors. There is only one elevator in the Jail for food service and commissary. When that breaks, the repercussions are significant. Residents with mobility issues must share that elevator as the escalators are not available.

Those are just some of the things that are being worked on. There are many more.

With an increase in the detainee population comes a corresponding rise in related expenditures, including food, clothing, bedding, and linens. Even before the federal surge, we had begun to experience steady population growth and anticipated that this trend would increase the cost of our food service contract. We are now in the process of amending that contract and estimate that additional funding of approximately **\$1.5 to \$2.5 million** will be required.

As you know, during the FY2026 budget process, we requested additional funding, which was not approved. Each year, the Sheriff's Office faces a growing **salary restriction ("vacancy savings")** amount—currently totaling **\$50.8 million**—which Finance advises is based on prior years' vacancies. However, we believe that historical vacancy data should not dictate current-year restrictions, particularly for a law enforcement agency with critical staffing needs.

We are consistently told that if additional funding is required to fill positions or address emergencies, we may seek assistance from Finance or the County Commission. Unfortunately, this fiscal year presents unique challenges: the County's unaudited fund balance stands at **\$69 million**, or roughly **14% of the policy requirement**, and there are ongoing difficulties meeting payroll obligations.

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The Sheriff's Office now faces a significant and growing challenge. The County jail population has reached historic levels, with no indication of a decline in the near future.

You asked what you can do. We urgently need your support and collaboration to secure **additional emergency funding** to manage this unforeseen and escalating situation. We told you and the Board that there would be a need for additional funding as a result of the federal Task Force. While the numbers are being worked on, and are contingent on housing plans, at least \$1.5 million will be needed.

You can support the General Sessions Clerk and Pre-Trial Services so that more personnel can be placed in the Jail. You could ensure that what you say about the Jail is fact based and not rumor.

Last year, the Sheriff's Office sought funding for a Jail Master Plan but then received an offer from the University of Tennessee's County Technical Assistance Service to have their lead correctional expert conduct it at no cost to the County. After months of work, a report was provided to your Board. There was no recommendation as to location but several were mentioned. The Board rejected a location where an outside company was offering to build the complex and lease it to the County.

Your Board has now created an Ad Hoc Committee regarding an RFP process for another Master Plan. While the Mayor's Administration has 3 people on it, the Sheriff's Office has only ONE, the undersigned. The agency needing the facility is the least represented. Perhaps you could advocate for more representation from the Sheriff's Office on the project?

Finally, you have asked several questions:

1. There have been no fatalities in the month of October.
2. The total arrests coming in to the Jail since October 1, 2025 is:
There were 773 felony arrests and 383 misdemeanor arrests. We cannot break down crimes by type.
3. We cannot provide a breakdown of zip codes of the arrestees.

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4. The current Jail population is 2909, 109 over capacity. The plans to address the population are set forth above.

With regard to a visit, we can discuss that.

We appreciate your interest and look forward to your support as we work together for the safety and well-being of our community.

Sincerely,



Kirk Fields
Chief Jailer

cc: Honorable Shante K. Avant, Chairwoman
Shelby County Board of Commissioners

Honorable David C. Bradford, Chair Pro Tempore
Shelby County Board of Commissioners

Honorable Amber Mills, District 1
Shelby County Board of Commissioners

Honorable Mick Wright, District 3
Shelby County Board of Commissioners

Honorable Brandon Morrison, District 4
Shelby County Board of Commissioners

Honorable Henri E. Brooks, District 7
Shelby County Board of Commissioners

Honorable Mickell M. Lowery, District 8
Shelby County Board of Commissioners

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Honorable Edmund Ford, Jr., District 9
Shelby County Board of Commissioners

Honorable Britney Thornton, District 10
Shelby County Board of Commissioners

Honorable Miska Clay Bibbs, District 11
Shelby County Board of Commissioners

Honorable Erika Sugarmon, District 12
Shelby County Board of Commissioners

Honorable Michael Whaley, District 13
Shelby County Board of Commissioners