

AA CENTRAL ILLINOIS/STATE

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Law changes contribute to inmate increase

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percent," said Cmdr. Mark Barthelmy of the Decatur Police Department's Criminal Investigation Division. "This year our homicide clearance rate is 100 percent, and the last two years it was 88 percent. For all major crimes, such as violent sexual assaults, gang violence, shootings and home invasions, we had an overall clearance rate last year of 88 percent. That's extremely high for any police department."

State's Attorney Larry Fichter said most felony cases are resolved in one to four months from the time of arrest until sentencing following a conviction or guilty plea.

"There are a number of factors which contribute to the jail population," Fichter said. "There are always people who cannot make bond even though one has been set. There are a few — not as many as people think — who are sentenced to the county jail. Others may be held for a week or so after sentencing and before transfer to the Illinois Department of Corrections."

Other people may be in jail because of arrests on civil warrants or for nonpayment of child support, Fichter said. "We try to move people through the system and out of jail as expeditiously as possible," he said. "On the juvenile side, I hope we can look at an expanded facility. While the adult crime rate is falling,

juvenile crime is a troublesome area for us."

Sheriff's Capt. Jerry Dawson said the jail's average daily inmate count for all of 1998 was 220, and the average number has increased in five of the last six years.

"It's leveled off this year and the reason is we had a meeting with the state's attorney, judges and probation office to see if we could move some of the inmates out," Walker said.

"We have people spending five or six months in jail on the county tab that could be moved out," Walker said, indicating removal to the Department of Corrections or placement on some form of court supervision are ways to help ease the crowding.

Another problem is bringing prisoners back from other states for trial and then watching them sit in jail for up to a year as their lawyers get continuances and the cases get bogged down, Walker said. "The jail was designed for a short-term stay," Dawson said. "Now, on felony cases, it's not unusual for stays to last more than one year."

A reason for more people being incarcerated is the legislature making felonies out of offenses which formerly were misdemeanors that could be handled by releasing the arrested person on a notice to appear in court, he said. Dawson said examples of the change in laws are alleged violations of orders

of protection or incidents of domestic battery. He said in the past alleged offenders could be released on a notice to appear but now they must be held in jail until they can appear before a judge, a process that can take several days if the alleged offense occurs after bond court is held on Saturday morning.

While sometimes having to place mattresses on the floor to accommodate the large number of adult jail inmates is nothing new, the situation has recently worsened in the juvenile center, which houses males and females up to age 18. Three juveniles were shipped last month to a new 64-bed juvenile detention center in Peoria County to be held because the 16-bed Bivens-Whitten center was full.

That was the first time the county had to place youth outside Bivens-Whitten since she arrived at the center in January, said Lori Long, deputy director of custody services for the facility. However, overcrowding problems at the center date back to 1990, the year after the facility opened.

"Our population has been as high as 22 in the past," Long said. "When that happens I get on the phone to Judge (John) Greanias and we try to figure out if we can place someone on home detention or supervision to ease the load. That's a really rough way to do business."

The Macon County Board Justice

Committee has been made aware of the space problem, Long said. A contract with McLean County, which has a 26-bed juvenile detention facility, was explored but never executed, she said.

Macon County is paying \$140 a day to Peoria County for each of the juveniles housed there, Long said. New juvenile facilities are under construction in Sangamon and Champaign counties, which could be available in future, she said. Sapp said the county board didn't proceed with the proposed contract with McLean County because it would have had to pay \$180 daily to reserve two beds whether it used them or not.

Many counties statewide are building new juvenile detention facilities and there will be an abundance of space in the near future, Sapp said. While the number of juveniles in detention is increasing statewide, he said he believes counties with facilities will be seeking to fill them through contracts at rates more favorable than those now available.

Justice Committee Chairman Mary Beth Jesse said the circuit judges are trying to keep status offenders, such as truants, from taking up space in the local detention center.

"What to do is a dilemma," Jesse said. "We hear about it every month in the Justice Committee meetings. There has been talk of trying to expand but no plans have been made."

When the Bivens-Whitten center was

built, the intention was to double bunk juveniles in the cells, Jesse said. But state space regulations now prohibit that arrangement, she said.

County Board Chairman Rob Owen said the Justice Committee has not informed him that a significant problem with overcrowding exists, although he is aware that sending juveniles to be housed in Peoria was approved.

"We don't see farming out juveniles as an acceptable solution, but there has been no significant discussion of this on the board level," Owen said. "Overcrowding is a significant problem we will have to deal with in the future. Now is the best time to look at alternatives."

Owen said he may re-create a committee which a previous board used to oversee the planning and construction of the Law Enforcement Center.

Walker said the jail's daily average inmate count has been 210 since June, down from between 224 and 225 a day for the same period last year. He said the jail has 267 beds including 27 in a dormitory area which does not comply with state regulations, which call for a correctional officer to be housed in a dorm area which has more than 25 inmates.

The county jail is cited by the state for such violations during regular inspections but state personnel also indicate it is one of the best run facilities in downstate Illinois, Walker said.

SUPPORT: Residents express mixed opinions

Continued from A1
Roberts said he had about 15 phone calls.

"Only one of those was negative," he said. "The rest told us to not back down. I got an e-mail from a mother in Mount Zion who doesn't even have kids in this district, and she was lending her support."

State Sen. N. Duane Noland, R-Blue Mound, said it is difficult for the public to make an informed decision.

"I was not present the night of the activity, I did not see the videotape of the fight, nor was I at the expulsion hearings," he said. "I read the newspaper and caught other media accounts."

Noland said Jackson or any other citizen has the right to give his opinion.

"Jackson is an international figure and that draws focus and media attention and takes away from the activity and turns it into more of a circus — a media spectacle," he said. "But he has a right to come in. The school board is elected by citizens to run the school to their best ability."

Noland said violence is a major issue and the legislature recognized that last spring with a series of measures, including making grants available to curb violence.

Carolyn Wagner, director of the "Not In Our Town" campaign in Decatur hopes the issue is resolved in an "amicable fashion."

"We're seeing a polarization of people. Our goal is 'Not In Our

Town' is to unify people. This proves that one is for more education."

State Rep. Julie A. Curry, D-Mat Zon calls the situation "unfortunate."

"This is obviously something that has divided the community, and there are good people who I respect on both sides," she said. "I support the school board policy for zero tolerance."

Curry said she has great respect for Jackson.

"I wish he came to Decatur to pull us together instead of using us further," she said. "I think his contact should be to provide support for the students to be reinstated at the end of the school year."

Several Decatur area residents were randomly contacted on Thursday afternoon.

Cristina Brandeberry, 28, thinks the school board should stand its ground.

"I don't feel like the students should get off scot-free — there's nothing wrong with expelling students," she said. "The 1989 Stephen Decatur High School graduate, 'They don't use us as examples as much as they should.'"

Emilee Sroka, 67, has lived in Decatur all her life and has four children attend Decatur schools.

"I think Jackson is wrong," she said. "I don't think it's any of his business. He wouldn't be in Decatur if those students weren't black."

"I'm supporting the school board, and I think two years is OK."

FICHTER: Will announce more next week

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Decatur school board, and Gary Hunt, director of human resources for the school district, addressed the media to clarify some of the facts surrounding the incident.

"This violence does not appear to be an isolated event and it appears there were at least two prior confrontations between two defined groups," Fichter said. "Persons who commit violence on school grounds should be held accountable."

No criminal charges have been filed, but at least four adults and five juveniles have been arrested on preliminary charges of felony mob action, battery and disorderly conduct, according to police.

Fichter refused to give any further details about the melee or the individuals involved. He promised more information about the investigation would be made public next week.

According to Macon County court documents, the fight at Eisenhower High School during a football game was a continuation of a dispute between the Gangster Disciples and Vice Lords street gangs.

Hunt said he has witnessed and broken up countless fights during his 36 years in education. He said participants in the Sept. 17 fight could be seen sleeping on people and pushing senior citizens out of the way as they chased each

other through the visiting bleachers, he said.

"What happened that night was not boys being boys," Hunt said. "This was a mob action, pure, plain and simple."

Taylor said the board's offer to consider shortening the punishments in May dependent upon participation in a community program is not an option normally given to expelled students.

"They have promised to give the young men an opportunity to prove themselves," Taylor said.

"The idea of this as a two-year death sentence for their education is not true."

Jackson has called for a march Sunday afternoon to protest the expulsions. Organizers were not able to give many details of the event Thursday.

Ryan said the group does not need a permit for a march or rally. Police officers may be on patrol near the event Sunday as a safety precaution, but Ryan said police have made no official plans concerning the rally or in the event the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition takes the students to their high schools Monday morning.

"We hope people use good judgment and not knowingly violate the law," Ryan said. "This is not just a disciplinary matter in the schools anymore. It has become an issue in the community."

Dona Bement, 26, has three children, including one in kindergarten at a Decatur school.

"I don't know the circumstances, but two years seems like a long time," she said.

"I may be fitting punishment. The school board is doing the right thing."

Shelly Brown, 24, has one preschool child.

"I think two years is a little drastic," she said. "I guess it depends on the kids' histories — how much trouble they've been in. If they're not bad kids, or in trouble a lot, then suspensions would be enough."

Philly Shanks, 25, has one preschool child.

"I think the school board went overboard," she said. "I think two years is ridiculous. The streets aren't an education. I say expel them for two to three weeks and give them community service."

Becky McCleery, 32, has two children.

"I think two years is light," she said. "What they did was uncalled for. My kids are in Decatur schools. These kids don't belong at school. They can't act like that. They belong in jail."

"I feel like if the school board rescinds that, it ties their hands for the future. I hope they stand their ground. Jackson ought to back out of this one. He's promoting violence in public schools."

A significant number of other people expressed their opinions, but did not want their names in the newspaper.

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AUDIT: Support checks delayed

Continued from A1
the audit committee at last week's meeting, including Demasio.

"I want to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem," Curry said. She said there's been too much finger-pointing while support checks, including her own, continue to be delayed.

"I'm very upset with what's happened. I'm a single mom who receives her support under the central office. It hasn't been a fun process," she said. Curry said her checks arrived about 10 days later than normal under the current system.

Also on Thursday, state Sen. N. Duane Noland, R-Blue Mound, asked his Senate colleagues to join him in calling on utility companies and creditors to go easy on people who are "unwitting victims of the bureaucracy."

"What we're saying to businesses, utility companies, lenders, landlords, is be a little tolerant. This is not the individual's fault. Just work with us and we'll get through all of this," Noland said. "Don't go overboard with shutting off someone's electricity."

BRIEFS

H&R staff reports

Park entrance to close for road paving

DECATUR — The Decatur Park District will pave the road at the south entrance of Faries Park today and Saturday, Nov. 6. The south entrance will be closed during paving and will reopen Saturday afternoon. Individuals wishing to access Faries Park during paving may use the north entrance off Rea's Bridge Road.

Auditions set to cast roles in "Oliver"

DECATUR — The Decatur Park District will hold solo and ensemble auditions for children to perform in the Greater Decatur Chorus's Broadway medley of "Oliver."

Auditions will be 5:30 to 7 p.m. Monday, Nov. 15, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, 1300 W. Main St. Children will be asked to select a song from the medley and music will be provided.

Cast requirements are "Oliver," a boy, grades 2-4, under 5 feet tall; "Artful Dodger," a boy, grades 5-9, in grades 5-9; and several "orphans," both boys and girls, under 5 feet tall, in grades 2-4.

To make an appointment, call the Decatur Park District recreation office, 422-8333.

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