

CHRIS BERTELSEN PHOTOS

(Top) The outdoor recreation area for medium and maximum security prisoners at the Sullivan County Correctional Facility is not even as large as a basketball court. (Right) In the minimum security wing at the Sullivan County Correctional Facility, six inmates share a room, in an environment more like a youth hostel or college dorm than a prison.

Jail is 'spent,' upgrade needed

Building falling apart, over capacity

By AARON ALDRIDGE
Staff Writer

If not for the razor wire on top of the chain-link fence surrounding the county jail, the building could easily be mistaken for an elementary school.

Officially known as the Sullivan County House of Corrections, the jail was constructed in 1978 and originally designed to house 44 inmates. The building, with its red brick facade and tan asphalt shingle roof, is located in the Sullivan County Complex in Unity and is a stone's throw from the nursing home.

"The building is spent and has been overly used," Sullivan County Manager Ed Gil de Rubio said during a tour of the facility on Thursday. "Past administrations did not invest in the building. Capital improvements did not exist until the last three years."

A recent needs assessment presented to the Sullivan County Delegation suggested the county needs a new jail at a cost of more than \$45 million.

The jail is currently charged with housing 102 inmates in three housing

units. Unit 1 is for male inmates, Unit 2 is for female inmates and Unit 3 is for maximum and minimum security inmates. According to director of operations Capt. John Milliken, 69 inmates are currently being held within the walls of the jail and the remainder are being held at other facilities.

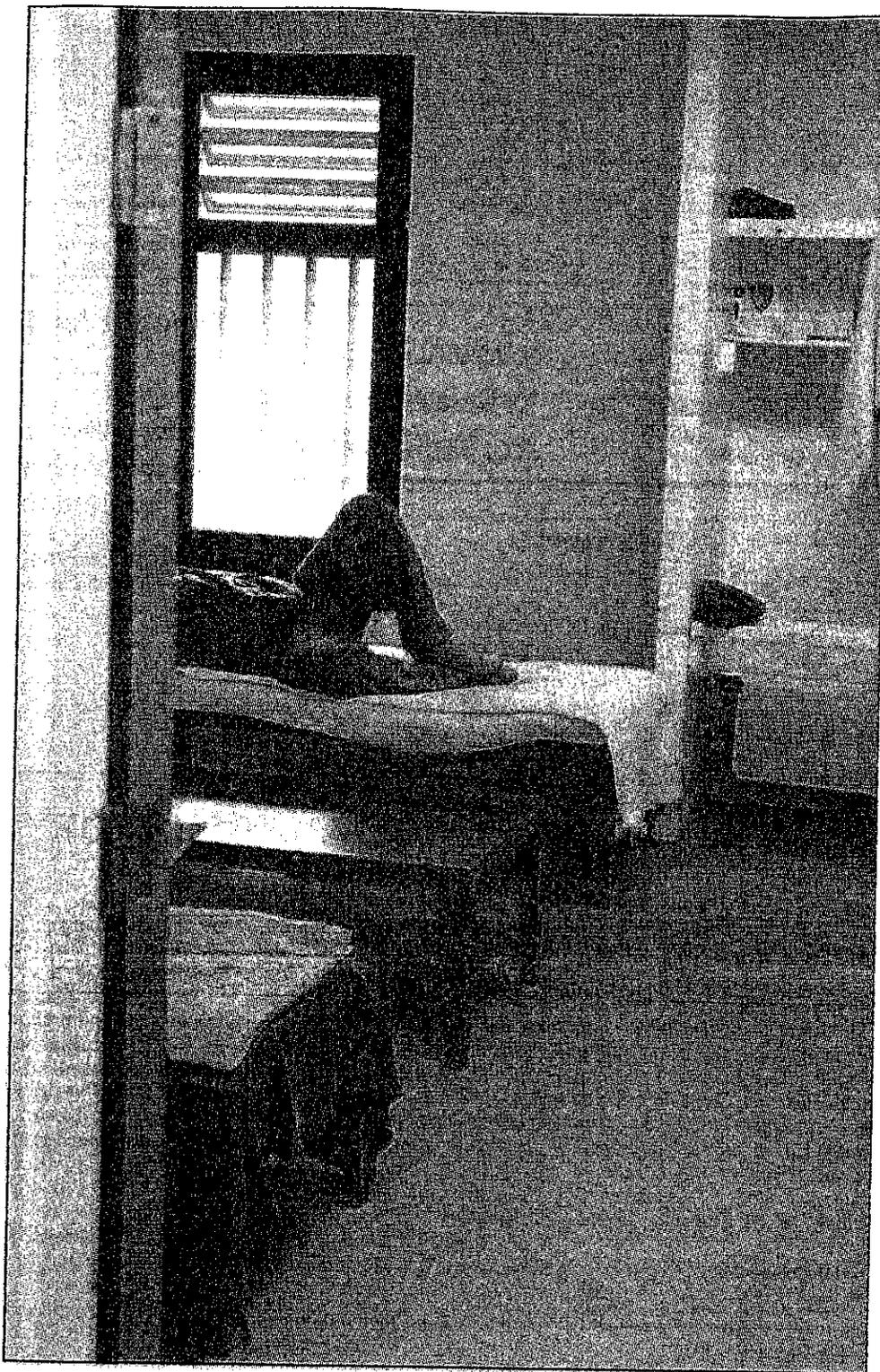
"A lot of their problems stem from substance abuse and mental issues," Milliken said. "There are no proper programs to help these inmates. Many have not been convicted and are here because they are waiting for trial or can't make bail. We need a facility to offer some life training and help with mental and substance abuse problems."

One small room able to hold about eight people is where programs and classes are held during the day. At one time, the room was used as the nursing station.

"We offer as many programs as space is available," Gil de Rubio said.

The overcrowding at the jail is most prevalent in the female unit where 11 women are being held in an area designed for four people.

"We have females living in the day room because there's not enough room,"



Milliken said. "They are our biggest growing population."

The most hardened criminals are held in the "Max Block" where inmates are kept in their 8- by 10-foot cells 23 hours per day. Each cell was originally designed to hold one person but now may hold up to three people.

A telling chart on the wall of the officer's station is used to keep track of the inmates. Each cell number is followed by one of three letters — T, B, or F — to indicate where an inmate should be sleeping. T is for the top bunk, B is for the bottom bunk and F is for the floor.

"This facility is not suited to meet the

needs of the population we have," Milliken said. "It's time to move in a new direction."

The assessment report projects the jail will need 194 beds by 2018 and 278 beds by 2025 if the current judicial system remains the same.

During operation Summer Sizzle last year, police arrested more than 50 people alleged to have committed some type of drug offense. That single operation swelled the jail population to more than 150, leaving the jail staff no option but to house inmates on cots in the cafeteria/dayroom, according to Milliken.

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Gil de Rubio said Sullivan County has several issues with economic development and drug abuse.

"There are no more mills or industries," Gil de Rubio said. "We don't have a good regional transportation system and there are generations of drug abusers."

But the jail is not only for drug addicts and convicted inmates. The jail is also used as a holding place for intoxicated people who may have not committed a crime or homeless people with mental problems.

"We have all these issues and the county jail is the receptor of these people," Gil de Rubio said. "We are the only place in the county for them and we are willing to accept that responsibility. In order to do so, we need the tools. We need a building where we can classify inmates and offer programs."

Overcrowding is not the only issue with the jail. According to Gil de Rubio, the ceiling in the kitchen caved in leaving a gaping hole.

"Luckily there was no one standing under the ceiling when it came down," Gil de Rubio said. "A pipe burst causing the ceiling to fall. The same thing happened in Unit 1."

Gil de Rubio said pipes are constantly bursting in the building, there is no sprinkler system for fire suppression and the heating and air conditioning is inconsistent at best.

"We've tried improvements like installing insulation," Gil de Rubio said. "But we can only do so much."

If a new jail is constructed, it would have five housing units for as many as 194 people, compared to the three housing units for 44 people at the current facility. The jail would be two stories with mezzanine housing and be constructed at the county complex in Unity.

"This building has been a good source of savings for the county," Gil de Rubio said. "No money has been spent on it for the past 20 years. Sullivan County is currently debt free and has no long-term debt. The jail has just outgrown its capabilities."

Aaron Aldridge can be reached at (800) 545-0347 ext. 139, or by e-mail at aaldridge@eagle-times.com.