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A worthwhile effort to cut jail population

The Register's editorial

Later this year, Polk County will execute one of the largest single transfers of prisoners in Iowa history. When complete, more than 1,000 inmates will have been moved from two existing jails in Des Moines and from other county jails around Iowa to a new Polk County Jail, set for opening in November.

For the first time in 20 years, Polk County will have all of its jail inmates under the same roof. The question is how long that will be true. The county has outgrown two jails in recent years, and when the new \$68 million facility northeast of Des Moines opens, it will have room for only 500 prisoners above the projected population on opening day. The challenge will be to avoid outgrowing that jail, too.

Polk County officials are not leaving that to chance: They have decided to become aggressive about holding down the jail population by creating a new coordinating group made up of top county, courts and law-enforcement officials. It's a smart move, and the county deserves credit for taking this initiative.

Holding down inmate numbers will save taxpayers money in daily jail operating costs and could forestall the possibility of yet another jail expansion. Even more important, it will allow people accused of less-serious crimes to get started on rebuilding their lives - going to work, paying the rent, caring for their kids, perhaps never to return behind bars.

The Polk County Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, officially organized last week, is made up of key leaders: Polk County Supervisors Chairman John Mauro; 3rd District Supervisor Tom Hockensmith; Sheriff Dennis Anderson; County Attorney John Sarcone; Chief Polk County District Judge Arthur Gamble; Sally Kreamer, director of the 5th Judicial District for the Iowa Department of Corrections; and Valorie Wilson of the state office of Public Defender in Des Moines. Other local groups and communities will be added to an enlarged board in the future.

This is not just another committee: These officials are in a position to make things happen that could make a difference in the county's jail-population numbers. Mauro, who will chair the council, said it is important that these key officials in decision-making positions - not their designates - be personally engaged. And it must be a consistent, continuing effort.

The goal is to do everything possible to make sure the jail population does not get out of hand - again. The county has authorized hiring a full-time analyst to provide statistical information on populations in the jail, courts and corrections systems, and the participating groups will share ideas for alternatives to incarceration.

The inspiration for this council is a similar body in Hillsborough County, Fla., which has significantly reduced its jail population through a variety of efforts, including creating specialized courts and programs to divert offenders from jail.

Polk County should hope to repeat Florida's success. Polk's jail population began exploding about 20 years ago, and today the county has filled the original 180-bed jail to more than capacity, along with a 300-bed jail annex opened in 1997. On top of that, it is sending several hundred prisoners to jails in other counties and even in neighboring states.

Polk County officials are determined not to see that history repeated. They have taken the right first step to make sure it doesn't.
