

Today's Kingman County Jail was built in 1959 and is part of the Law Enforcement Center at 120 N. Spruce. The original jail had eight beds and was condemned in 1979. The old cells were closed and a jail addition was built on the east side in 1980, again with eight beds. Overcrowding in the 1980s prompted the Kingman County Sheriff to ask the state for more beds. That's how the jail reached its current capacity of 13 beds.

A county jail is a crucial asset to the maintenance of an orderly society and community, noted Robert Aguirre, an inspector from the National Institute of Corrections who evaluated the Kingman jail in 2009, adding that most who are in a local jail will return to the community from which they came.

The history and shortcomings of the jail are well-known by Kingman County Sheriff Randy Hill, who oversees its day-to-day operations. All the cells are on a single hallway, which means the only way to monitor them is to stand directly outside the door and view inmates through a small window. Currently, there is only one cell door separating detention officers from inmates. Detention staff must have physical contact with inmates to take them to a dayroom for at least one hour each day as required. An inmate has only to overpower a jailer outside a cell and get through a single door to freedom.

The current jail requires all inmates to enter and exit the LEC through the same small room used by visitors, victims and the public. There is not enough room to adequately classify inmates. The only classification routinely met is male and female. All too often inmates who have yet to be convicted are sharing cells with those serving sentences. Those charged with misdemeanors could find themselves in the same cell with someone charged with a more serious, violent crime.

"Somebody charged with stealing a loaf of bread should not be in the same cell as somebody charged with murder," Hill said. Lack of space has meant housing inmates at other jails at additional cost. Hill can push his capacity but only temporarily. "We have some mattresses we can put on the floor for a short period. I try not to go over three to four days but I have put people on the floor up to three to four weeks. That's pushing my ability to keep the county safe from lawsuits."

Hill said he processes between 500 and 600 people in through the jail every year. The sheriff's office conducted 5,805 arrests from 2000-2009. From 2010 to October 2013, 1,869 arrests were made. Among the trends is a growing number of female arrests and many in jail have some type of issue with illegal drugs.

When a jail is at 80 percent capacity, experts say it is considered overcrowded. Inmates can serve up to one year in the county jail. The jail has had some of its highest inmate populations ever in 2014 and has been short beds on several nights. Inmates have been housed out-of-county at extra cost. The current cells are not compatible with the Americans with Disabilities Act. An inmate in a wheelchair must be physically carried into a cell by an officer. The showers are not wheelchair accessible.

Federal courts started taking note of inmate rights in the 1970s. There is case law that defines how jails should be operated and a means to hold jail officials accountable. If a court orders that a jail make substantial improvements, any cost must be paid by the entity running the jail, in this case Kingman County. A local county cannot delay or push the issue aside by saying, "We can't afford this," notes the NIC. Paying the bills from a lawsuit and improvements could require diverting funds from other county agencies.

"We're waiting for the lawsuit," said Hill. "We have so many issues with this building. Someday, somebody's going to win a lawsuit against us. The last thing I ever want to do is put money into one of these prisoner's pockets."