

Dawson County jail meets all federal standards—again

Written by Deb Egenberger
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Reiber says it's tough to be consistently in compliance.

LEXINGTON—From employee training to facility cleanliness and inmate calorie intake, Dawson County's jail meets every requirement the jail standards board has determined is necessary.

The jail was inspected in March by a Nebraska Crime Commission official and a report was filed in April.

"To stay within all those standards is pretty tough," said Dawson County sheriff Gary Reiber who serves as jail administrator. "I tell my staff we are going to meet those standards and I don't give them much of a choice."

Since opening the new jail in 1993, Reiber said the staff has met all of the standards more often than not.

Only a handful of times has the jail been out of compliance on anything, he said, and when it was, the matter was minor.

"We might not have the correct documentation on something," he said. "Or right after we opened the new jail, there was a cardboard box in the stairwell. It's always been something pretty minor and we've corrected it immediately."

But meeting all 275 individual standards is not minor, he said. It proves Dawson County is running a constitutionally acceptable jail and meeting minimum federal requirements.

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The items are specific and range everywhere from professionalism of employees to inmate money, emergency procedures, library materials and recreation time.

Every jail in the state and its records are inspected once a year.

Reiber, who was appointed by the governor to serve on the state jail standards board more than 10 years ago, said there are 10-12 jails in the state out of compliance in one area or another every time the board has a quarterly meeting.

“Some of the things can be corrected in a short amount of time,” he said, noting the box on the stairs. “Other items like a heating or air conditioning problem aren’t so simple. That’s when you have to file a corrective plan of action and prove you’re working on a correction.”

If an infraction is not corrected, Reiber said the law allows the standards board to pursue closure of a jail.

“We’re not out to close jails,” he said. “We just want them to be run correctly.”

The extensive list of standards outlines minimum requirements for jails in Nebraska and Reiber said it stems mostly from court rulings.

“Most of the public probably thinks we ought to feed inmates bread and water, for instance,” Reiber said. “The jail standards board and the courts believe differently.”

The standards inspections ensure basic needs are being met and rules have been followed. Reiber said that’s a plus for jails and for counties should a jail ever get sued.

As an example, Reiber said if an inmate tries to hang himself and a family sues the jail for

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wrongful death claiming no one supervised the suicidal inmate, documentation required by the standards board provides evidence in the county's defense.

"I have the ultimate responsibility," Reiber said. "I'm sure no one in the county wants to be paying the cost of a lawsuit."

County commissioners commended Reiber for meeting all of the standards.