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State cites mold, wood rot as health concern at Hampshire County jail; upgrades coming for inmates, sewage system

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NORTHAMPTON — Deteriorating conditions in a modular building continue to pose a “health and safety” risk to inmates at the Hampshire County Jail and House of Correction, according to a recent state inspection.

But the problems largely in showers and bathrooms, do not come as much of a surprise to jail officials who have been trying to maintain a building that is some 23 years past its intended life span.

“It’s a 28-year-old building that was designed for five years,” Patrick Cahillane, the jail’s deputy superintendent said this week after giving a Gazette reporter and photographer a tour of the facility to observe the conditions cited by the state health department. “Until it’s solidly fixed, it’s going to continue to deteriorate.”

A December report by the Department of Public Health cited more than 200 health and sanitation violations at the jail, including 90 that existed during a previous inspection in May 2015. Although the vast majority of issues involve easy and swift fixes, such as cleaning dusty vents and relocating mops, the inside of a modular building that housed 77 inmates as of Tuesday is enough of a concern to the health department that the state agency wants to stay apprised of its condition.

“There has been no improvement in the North and South Modular showers and bathroom areas since the Department’s last inspection,” a state environmental

health inspector wrote in a Dec. 21 report to Hampshire County Sheriff Robert J. Garvey. "The Department remains concerned with the compromised structural integrity that is putting the health and safety of inmates at risk due to structural rot and exposure to mold."

The Hampshire County Jail and House of Correction, off Route 66 in Northampton, is not alone among jails when it comes to such reviews. Other county jails statewide are routinely cited for scores of health and state sanitary code violations, including those in Hampden and Franklin counties, where the latter jail was flagged in November for 100 repeat violations from its previous inspection, including damaged floor paint in dozens of cells and shower areas. In many areas of the Hampshire County jail there were no violations found.

The state health department is required by law to inspect correctional facilities twice annually and the primary purposes of these inspections are to ensure they meet standards that protect the health and safety of residents and report on its findings and recommendations, according to the state agency.

State law also requires the department to make rules for correctional facilities and detention centers regarding the care and use of eating and drinking utensils, bedding, ventilation of buildings, plumbing facilities, and for the general health and safety of the prisoners. County jails are required to submit corrective action plans within 10 days when violations are found, detailing how they plan to address them and timetables for the fixes.

The plan of correction provides a monitoring tool for the agency and important documentation for facilities not only to address conditions but also to budget for capital expenditures, health department spokesman Omar Cabrera wrote in an email to the Gazette.

Modular wear and tear

There were 234 prisoners at the county jail during a Dec. 14 inspection when the state cited nearly 50 violations in the showers and bathrooms of the north and south sections of its modular building housing inmates.

Among the problems are rotted wall studs, floor joists and sill plates as well as sections of floors and walls that are cracking and separating. Peeling paint, soap scum and mold along floors, walls and ceilings also were flagged during the

review.

The findings in the modular building, which can house up to 120 inmates, have been a longstanding challenge for the jail's maintenance crew, according to Cahillane. The building was owned by a private company and leased by the state until the Department of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance ultimately acquired it last month.

"It's used 24 hours, 7 days a week, so from that perspective we've got a lot of wear and tear," Cahillane said.

He said the jail takes pride in maintaining a clean and safe facility and that its staff has addressed each of the issues outlined in the health department's latest inspection report.

"We put a team of supervisors together to go through and assess everything on the list," Cahillane said. "All of the staff pitched in to do that."

The environmental and sanitary conditions within a jail or state prison are important for the health of inmates, who are incarcerated "as punishment, not to be punished," said Leslie Walker, executive director of Prisoners' Legal Services of Massachusetts, a nonprofit law office in Boston that serves indigent prisoners.

Issues like mold, for example, should be a concern. "A lot of people are asthmatic and come from urban areas," Walker said. "It could exacerbate an existing illness or cause one."

Walker said that while her legal group typically works on more "life-and-death" matters facing inmates as well as issues such as overcrowding, they do get calls now and then from inmates about jail or prison conditions.

"We typically will notify a superintendent," Walker said. "We ask them what their plan is and they're usually pretty responsive and want to get things fixed."

A tour of the modular building at the Hampshire County Jail and House of Correction on Monday, where inmates were seen socializing, sleeping and reading — and heard showering, shows evidence of the jail's many ongoing maintenance challenges and repairs.

A piece of plywood rests over a rotting floor in a bathroom stall, a large section of paint has peeled off a shower floor while several floor tiles outside inmates' rooms have been periodically replaced with different color tiles. Cahillane said staff took immediate steps to address dirty floors, soap scum and mold issues found in shower areas. The jail has a maintenance crew of 4½ positions.

"These things are going to be recurring no matter how much we stay on top of them," Cahillane said. "We have a lot of inmates taking showers."

Upgrades coming

Updating facilities for inmates in the modular building has been planned by the jail for more than a decade. In 2003, the jail had a study commissioned under the Department of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance to examine constructing new inmate housing to replace the modular building. It consists of a series of trailers pushed together that sit on a 4-foot-high foundation and are separated into north and south sections by a fire wall and control area for staff. Outside, that fire wall has a deep and long crack as it juts out from the building's wood-paneled exterior. The 2003 study went nowhere.

"Like everything at that time, there wasn't any money," Cahillane said as he thumbed through the thickly bound, 12-year-old study in his office.

He said the good news is that the jail is again working with the Department of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance to refurbish the modular building at an estimated cost of nearly \$1.8 million. The project is in the planning stages and could begin as early as this year. The work is expected to go a long way toward eliminating the kinds of code violations the health department continues to cite within the structure during the state agency's bi-annual inspections.

"We are working with (DCAMM) to resolve these types of situations," Cahillane said. "It'll probably be a year-long project once it gets under way."

The jail also is undertaking another sanitation-related project that involves the installation of a surge grinding station, which would be connected to the city's sewer system and is designed to collect and grind solid matter not typically found in wastewater. The \$733,000 state-funded project is designed to help prevent sewer line blockages and backups from materials that have sometimes been traced back to the jail. The jail currently uses a system that relies on

inmates to fish out with a long tool the solid debris that gets caught in an iron rod mechanism on the jail's grounds.

"We want to be as proactive with the community as we can be," Cahillane said as he explained the surge grinding station project. "From a public health standpoint, we thought it was the right thing to do."

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