

Problems with jail persist

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Crowded conditions may lead to lawsuit

Today, on the first anniversary of the jailhouse slaying of 65-year-old inmate Joel Seidel, critics say the Camden County Jail remains dangerously crowded, and conditions aren't likely to improve soon.

Seidel, a mentally ill retired stockbroker, was allegedly stomped to death by his cellmate, Marvin Lister, 36, who was in the jail on a rape charge. Lister is scheduled to be arraigned in Seidel's death Monday. Seidel was in jail because he could not post \$150 bail for allegedly violating a restraining order.

"We receive more complaints from the Camden County Jail than any other jail," said Ed Barocas, legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union's New Jersey chapter. "We are very concerned that problems there still remain."

Though the ACLU seldom pursues court action on behalf of inmates, it is considering legal action against Camden County because of jail crowding, Barocas said, because "the complaints are so horrific."

Camden County officials said Wednesday they are making improvements. As many as 200 low-level offenders will be released with monitoring bracelets, said retired Superior Court Judge John Mariano, who's heading a committee searching for ways to reduce the jail population.

An additional 100 inmates will be assigned to work-release programs.

But while those steps may reduce the number of inmates, Mariano said, efforts to clean up Camden are bringing in hundreds of new prisoners. As many as 90 people are being picked up at a time in sweeps of the city, he said.

He declined to say how much the jail population will be reduced in the next six months.

"You're not going to lock anybody into a number, so you better get that straight," Mariano said.

Ten months ago, federal investigators recommended that the jail population be reduced to 1,038 prisoners. On Wednesday, 1,770 inmates were incarcerated, 732 more than recommended.

Last year, when Seidel was killed, as many as four inmates were crammed into cells designed to hold one.

Earlier this month, Christopher Miller, a 22-year-old inmate, committed suicide in the same mental health ward where Seidel died. Three other inmates were in his cell. Miller slept on the floor before he hanged himself. The Camden County Prosecutor's Office is investigating the suicide.

"The recent suicide of Kip Miller is sad and tragic, just as was the death of Joel Seidel," said attorney [Tom Kline](#), who has filed a federal civil rights lawsuit on behalf of the Seidel family.

"In the past year, much has been exposed regarding the deficiencies at the jail, especially the inadequate treatment of mentally ill inmates. One goal of this pending civil rights lawsuit is to bring about necessary changes," Kline said.

Some Camden County residents said they support better conditions at the jail.

"It's a disgrace. I don't believe you can warehouse people and herd them into cells like cattle," said Cherry Hill resident Phyllis Leopold, 77. But she's not sure she'd want to spend more money to fix the problems.

"We just got our bill for taxes," she said, "and my God, they're sky high now." She and her husband, Richard, said they would want to know more before they could support new jail construction.

A new jail is out of the question, said Mariano.

Camden County freeholders, who run the jail, are not considering new construction. Federal investigators had recommended that the county spend money to put prisoners in other facilities. Mariano said that proposal is not being considered. Most other jails in the state, though not as crowded as Camden County's, are over capacity, Mariano said.

Only court action can force government to improve conditions, said Ed Martone of the N.J. Association on Corrections, a prisoners' rights group.

After nine years of legal wrangling with the state's Public Advocate Office, Camden County opened its jail in 1988. But former Gov. Christie Whitman abolished the advocate's office in 1994.

Now there is no one who routinely represents inmates, Martone said, in lawsuits that typically last between five and 10 years. For government officials, said Martone, the pressure is off.

"They know there's no hammer above them, there's no state agency that's going to sue them," said Martone. "Prison officials have taken that as a green light to do pretty much whatever they want. It shows their contempt for the people who have to live ... and work ... in those kinds of conditions."

The problem is not unique to Camden County, said William C. Collins, a Washington state legal expert with more than 20 years of experience in correctional law.

More than 400 jails and prisons around the country have been ordered by courts to improve conditions, Collins said. Forty-eight states have had court orders demanding they improve their jails.

But county officials who allow crowded conditions to continue take a risk, said Collins.

They can be sued by inmates who are injured, or the survivors of those who die, he said.

"Sometimes it takes a serious blow upside the head to get a county to move on something," said Collins.

If the county does not adopt changes suggested in the National Institute of Corrections study ... and two others that recommended sweeping reforms ... it could help establish that the county showed "deliberate indifference" to the rights of inmates, Collins said. And that would establish grounds, he said, for lawsuits that, around the country, have paid out millions in damages.