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Jail Food Gobbles Budget

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With a steadily increasing inmate population and an expected moderate rise in U.S. gasoline prices, the Hays County Jail has recommended a \$500,000 food supply budget for fiscal year 2014.

Hays County Sheriff Gary Cutler proposed the recommendation, an \$81,879.80 increase from last year's amended food supply budget, during an August Hays County Commissioner Court meeting.

"Ultimately, food costs aren't going down, gas prices aren't going down," said Lt. Eric Batch of the Hays County Sheriff's Office. "Year after year, month after month, the deliveries and the price of the product is going up, so we're going to need more money to continue that same thing we've been doing."

According to the Hays County Expense Budget Worksheet Report, the jail's annual food supply costs have averaged \$475,022 since 2010.

Capt. Mark Cumberland of the Hays County Sheriff's Office said an annual five-to-10 percent increase in the food supply budget is typical because of the need to feed an unpredictable and fluctuating inmate population.

"You can't not feed the inmates," said Cumberland, adding that the county will traditionally set aside emergency funds for the jail in case the facility falls short.

The 362-bed detention facility books an average of 8,000 inmates per year, with slight influxes during die summer months.

In June, the average total inmate population peaked at 327, the highest it has been since 2011.

Batch said he believes the summer inmate increase may be attributed to popular warm weather-related activities and events that tend to generate arrests with an average jail stay of 60 days for a misdemeanor and nine-to-12 months for a felony.

Common violations throughout the year include varying degrees of public intoxication, driving while intoxicated, assault and theft.

"It does run from unpaid speeding ticket all the way up to capital murder, and we have them all," Batch said.

The Hays County Jail houses one inmate that has been indicted for capital murder and seven-to-nine who have been indicted for murder, hje continued.

When it comes to food, the jail serves breakfast, lunch and dinner for the equivalent of 1,086 people a day, regardless of charges or classification.

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"We don't get a lot! of complaints that I'm aware of," said Batch. "People will complain about anything. The food is fair for these inmates and it's not over the top and it's not crap. The dietician wouldn't let us serve, the state, we wouldn't be in compliance. So there's lots of checks and balances."

Kitchen staff and the Central Texas Medical Center licensed dietician who approves all jail menus will make special concessions for those inmates with dietary restrictions.

Texas Commission on Jail Standards requires that all meal plans be served in accordance with nationally recognized nutrition standards.

Hays County Chief Jamie Page said inmates' average daily caloric intake is 2,100.

At 4:30 a.m. breakfast trays, which may consist of two biscuits, white gravy, sausage and grits, like the ones served last Wednesday, are taken on carts to the gender-segregated dormitory blocks by "trustees," inmates who have voluntarily applied and been chosen to work in the jail's kitchen.

Batch said up to eight trustees, who have passed a minor background check, can perform various kitchen duties, like cooking and preparing the meals, for up to 48 hours a week with five civilian staff and an officer to monitor their progress.

"We have had inmate-on-inmate fighting in (the kitchen) before, but they're rare," said Batch. "The last one that I witnessed was back in 2007."

Trustees, who also perform various custodial and ground maintenance duties, save the jail about \$620,000 a year, according to Page.

The female dormitory block, whose total population had an average high of 47 in July, is separated into four sections based on the inmates' minimum, maximum, trustee and unclassified designations.

Two trustees, clad in hairnets and gloves, opened each "blue food shoot" to place the necessary number of trays for the routine 10:30 a.m. lunch of Wednesday's baked potato, chopped beef, potato salad, beans, bun and pudding, as well as water and juice.

A perk of being a trustee is that they receive two trays of food served.

"It's a benefit to them, especially if it's a good day on a good meal," said Cumberland, who compared the jail's food quality to that of the military's.

Inmates get 45-60 minutes to eat each meal that Batch said costs an average of \$1.30.

Meal costs vary based on when the food is ordered from such vendors as Sysco, U.S. Foods and various local businesses.

Cumberland said he believes at one time the jail purchased food from the same supplier of the restaurant chain Fuddrucker's. The facility does work with the same vendor as San Marcos establishment Center Point Station, but he said the quality is not the same.

"Our chief loves to say (that) because he takes pride in our jail, which we all do, but they're not getting Fuddrucker's burgers," he said.

Dinner is served at 4:30 p.m., with meal times staggered because of shift changes and inmate medication use.

If inmates want a taste of the outside, they have opportunities to purchase items like warm, bottled soda and ice cream from the jail's commissary, which Batch said brings in an average of \$8,000 a month.

All commissary funds go directly back to inmates through the jail's book and DVD collections, among others.

"Unfortunately, some inmates can compare our facility and our food to other facilities

and other facilities' food - trust me, they like [ours] better," Batch said.

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