

LEGISLATORS OBSERVE JAIL CONDITIONS

By Michelle Boyd Waters
Staff Writer

■(GIT) Approximately \$48 million annually and additional personnel funding is required for Oklahoma sheriff departments to meet the national sheriff departments average, said Rep. C. Michael Thornbrugh, R-Tulsa.

Members of the Jail Task Force, a joint interim study, visited the Wagoner County Jail on Wednesday to observe conditions that John Walsh, executive director of the Oklahoma Sheriff's Association, said exemplified the disrepair of most of Oklahoma's county jails.

"I think (the tour) reaffirmed what we already suspected," Thornbrugh said. "The situation must be addressed financially from a state level. But the state can't afford to support all the county jails."

He said the members of the Jail Task Force, who are studying the problems associated with the jails, discussed possible options, but did not make any decisions.

One option included the possibility of setting up a jail trust authority or oversight committee. The task force also discussed community sentencing, problems the sheriff's had with the previous bill and regional jails.

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- Changing the method of appointing the court administrator;
- Allowing only treating physicians to determine that an injured worker is permanently impaired;
- Eliminating percentage payments of attorneys' fees and making attorneys' fees dependent on the number of hours involved in working a case;
- Elimination of lump sum settlements;
- Focusing on employer and employee education and safety;
- Criminalization of workers' compensation fraud as a felony punishable by prison time and a fine; and

- Amending current law to tighten the definition of compensable injuries in cases where the worker has ended their employment with a company and had neither previously reported a work-related injury nor sought medical treatment for such an injury.

Fallin, who also schooled those at Wednesday's meeting on how a bill winds its way through the legislative process, said other recommendations not yet formalized would also be included in the proposal.

"No one had an answer," Thornbrugh said. "What can you do? They must accept every prisoner at their doorstep."

"It will take a substantial amount of money to get up to standards," Walsh said.

He was not sure if any legislation would be introduced during the 46th legislature, but said that the system would have to be changed, by legislation or other means.

Thornbrugh said that corrections would be the most dominate issue to be faced during next year's session.

The Oklahoma Sheriff's Department employs 173 part-time sworn-in deputies, less than the national average for part-time staff.

Rep. Thornbrugh said that in 1993, the nationwide operational expenditure for sheriffs' departments was \$124.7 million while Oklahoma sheriffs' departments were underfunded \$84 million annually.

The national average for base starting salary for entry-level sheriff employees was \$19,393 while Oklahoma's starting salary was \$15,000, less than the average.

Fourteen percent of Oklahoma's elected sheriffs make less than \$20,000 per year and 45 percent make less than \$25,000 per year, Thornbrugh said.

Tulsa and Wagoner counties can serve as examples of the statewide problems, Thornbrugh said.

The Tulsa Sheriff's Department employs 195 full-time, sworn-in deputies while the national average is 390 for departments in similar counties. Tulsa's operational expenditures last year were \$3.6 million and the national average was \$15.3 million.

In Wagoner County, the Sheriff's Department employs 8 full-time, sworn-in deputies while the national average is 25 for similar counties. The department's operational ex-

penditures were \$309,000 but the national average was \$2.7 million Thornbrugh said.

He also added that two sheriffs were elected recently that had no law enforcement experience or CLEET certification.

Solutions to the problems faced by the county jail system that the legislature might consider include regional jails, privatization, the appropriation of more resources to the jail system and video arraignment. (Legislation is in place to provide for video arraignments, however, no funding was appropriated by the legislature to allow counties to buy the equipment.)

"The sheriffs didn't get the cost per diem they were promised last year," Thornbrugh said.

He said there would be a bipartisan approach this year to raise the cost per diem paid to the county jails from \$7.

"I think that some legislators will get a first-hand look at how bad the jail system really is," Thornbrugh said. "It is a horrendous situation."

Walsh said Oklahoma's county jails are suffering from a lack of funds for maintenance, personnel and alleviation of overcrowding.

"The buildings were built in the early part of the century," Walsh said. "We have totally outmoded facilities. Our system is incapable of dealing with today's inmates. The jails are drastically undermanned."

He said one of the most severe problems is understaffing. One staff member must supervise 30 to 40 inmates in the Wagoner County Jail, the director said. That staff member must also run the communications center, attend to visitors and meet other needs.

"There is one person where there should be 3 to 5 people," Walsh said.

ELECTION CHALLENGES REMAIN UNRESOLVED; WEDEL WITHDRAWS RECOUNT REQUEST

By Shawn Ashley
Staff Writer

■(GIT) Voters and candidates in one state House and one state Senate race continued to hold their breath Wednesday while local election board officials and district judges sorted through ballots and charges of voting irregularities.

While recounts of all the House District 41 ballots in Garfield County and Logan County ballots in the Senate District 21 were scheduled for Wednesday, only the House race recount was taking place, assistant state election board secretary Carol Dennis said. And that, she added, was moving slowly.

By mid-afternoon, Dennis said, only six of the Garfield County's 21 ballot boxes, including the absentee box, had been recounted at the request of Curt Roggow, R-Enid. Roggow demanded the recount and alleged a series of voting irregularities in his 11-vote loss last week to incumbent Sean Voskuhl, D-Marshall. The pace was slowed, Dennis said, by the

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