



CITY OF ATLANTA

City Auditor's Office
Leslie Ward, City Auditor
404.330.6452

March 2009

Performance Audit:

Department of Corrections

What We Found

The Department of Corrections recovers proportionately less in facility operating costs for housing non-city inmates than the amount of space leased, in part because the per diem has not been adjusted in several years, and in part because costs are too high.

The city's per diem rate was last set in 2005, based on 2004 costs. The department's costs have since increased by 19%. However, the 2005 per diem rate was already lower than the department's operating costs, because overtime was not considered in the federal calculation and the calculated rate was outside the range the US Marshals Service was willing to pay, suggesting that operating costs were unreasonably high.

Although the detention facility is designed to operate cost-effectively, the department's practice of separating inmates by jurisdiction (federal, county, and city) results in unused capacity and increased personnel costs. During fiscal year 2008, more than half of the pods averaged below 75% capacity. Neither ACA guidelines nor federal or county housing contracts require inmates to be segregated by jurisdiction.

The department's practice of segregating inmates by jurisdiction requires a staff coverage plan for the facility irrespective of the number of inmates. The department cannot achieve its coverage plan with the number of employees it has, given the level of absences. Corrections officers were absent for leave or training approximately one-fifth of their scheduled shifts in fiscal year 2008. The department compensates for lack of staff with overtime and reduced support post coverage, increasing costs that cannot be recovered through lease revenues and likely contributing to employees' perceptions that the department is understaffed.

Because the department treats most of its costs as fixed – most costs do not vary based on the number of inmates housed – the decision to lease more bed space to Fulton County benefits the city's bottom line. However, cost recovery will still be proportionately less than the amount of space leased unless the department can negotiate a higher per diem rate or reduce costs.

Why We Did This Audit

We undertook this audit after the city's Integrity Line received a number of calls alleging that officers were not properly trained and certified and that staffing at the Atlanta Detention Center was inadequate.

Correctional officers and the labor union also expressed concern that inadequate staffing levels at the detention facility threatened officer safety. We focused our review on detention facility staffing, officer certification and training, and the extent to which operational costs are recovered by housing non-city inmates.

What We Recommended

To address operational inefficiencies and lower operating costs, the Chief of Corrections should:

- Redistribute inmates to maximize facility capacity by combining jurisdictions where possible and closing underused pods.
- Adjust the staffing plan to allow for fluctuations in the inmate population.
- Reduce leave usage and departmental overtime.
- Renegotiate the current per diem rate and consider the feasibility of negotiating a separate fee for inmates in special management pods.
- Ensure that all officers become certified and receive the required 40 hours of annual training.

For more information regarding this report, please contact Stephanie Jackson at 404.330.6678 or sjackson@atlantaga.gov.