

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Last month, we moved all detention operations into our new facility on Highway 70 West. Our old site opened in 1925 with capacity for 34 people. Despite adding an annex in 1994 and renovating the kitchen in 2012, the 97-year-old facility was decades behind modern standards.

Detention Officer Lisa Thompson characterized the move as the beginning of a new era. She said, “I’ve worked here for 20 years. When I was hired, they were talking about a new jail. It is so nice to finally have one.”

For years, state inspectors with the NC Department of Health and Human Services cited us for multiple inadequacies. We weren’t passing inspections – in our obsolete facility, we couldn’t. Our kitchen, medical, and laundry facilities were insufficient, and in many cases either impossible or inordinately expensive to repair. Here’s just one example: a shower drain stopped working two or three years ago – a simple clog. After digging up the floor, we learned the cast iron pipe around the drain pipe had disintegrated. For a time, water was still able to pass through the concrete channel around the pipe, but eventually that failed as well. That “simple” drain problem cost \$25,000 to fix.

We also had numerous safety concerns, such as an inadequate suicide prevention cell and no sprinkler system. The cost to retrofit the jail with sprinklers? Almost two million dollars!

Recognizing the momentous – and rare – nature of the occasion, we called the operational plan governing community safety during the move “Blue Moon.” With help from the North Carolina State Highway Patrol and a State Bureau of Investigation task force, we moved 70 inmates from the old facility to the new one in a process that took over five hours and involved more than 80 people. We searched each person as they exited the old jail and again as they entered the new one. We also checked each person’s belongings for contraband before separately shuttling property to the new facility.

Captain Katie Spear said we didn’t just move; we walked out of one dimension and into another. She is correct. The company that made the gates, keys, and locking mechanisms for the old facility has been out of business for years. We had difficulty finding anyone capable of making repairs. The new building has a state-of-the-art electronic system. No one needs to walk around with rings of old style keys, fumbling to find the right one.

Major Tim Jones is our Jail Administrator. He has noticed a drastically improved work flow in the new space. Detention officers seated at a centralized control tower open and shut electronic doors from a video console as other officers accompany residents to different parts of the building, such as to the medical area or to the attorney visitation booths.

The new 48,900-square-foot facility has space for 144 inmates. We can now better serve their safety, security, and human service needs. We have a properly equipped kitchen, a larger laundry room, a better medical facility, a break room for employees, and adequate storage. Major Jones will have a supervisors meeting after all four squads rotate through day and night shift duty. At the meeting, he will collect observations and create a work flow punch list to improve our ability to maximize the modern capabilities of the facility.

There are two workrooms within the secure part of the building. Community professionals and staff members from the Criminal Justice Resource Department will use these rooms to provide education and specialized programming designed to help residents of the facility make a successful transition back to the community. We are also pleased to have tablets available for inmate use. These devices allow video visits and text exchanges with loved ones; all such visits and communications are monitored. Although residents do not have access to the internet other than through the Paytel service, if a person takes an online anger management or drug education class, he or she can earn points toward watching a movie or playing an approved video game.

There's no way to sugarcoat it; the old facility was rough. Everyone associated with the new facility benefits from the improved air quality and the brighter, less cramped space. People confined there now live in a cleaner, more modern facility better suited to their often complicated needs; and the safer, brighter facility certainly boosts employee morale. We dreamed about this new detention center for two decades. Captain Spear said it best: "It feels like we went from a T-Rex to a Tesla."