



## News Release

May 19, 2022

### **Sheriff Helder: “Let the Community Vote on Jail Expansion”**

I will be asking the Quorum Court to push a Detention Center expansion initiative out to the voters. This will include Covid mitigation and a major jail expansion. The overcrowding issue has been at the forefront of our county’s needs for over 8 years now, and the Springdale Police Department closing their jail in 2020 just exacerbated the situation. Our only relief came due to COVID-19 when we worked with the Prosecuting Attorney and the Courts to release elderly and non-violent, at-risk detainees. Sadly, a large percentage of those released have failed to appear and are now back in jail.

We have worked with a variety of groups to address this issue in an effort to reduce our growing numbers. The Bail Project came in to assist in release of people who were unable to make bond. We began a pre-trial release program to identify those with the least potential to commit violent acts upon release and we put them out on ankle monitors. To top that off, we hold virtually no misdemeanants and release well over 300 people a month who would otherwise be in our facility.

Over the past several months I have been working with members of our Court, primarily Chair of Finance Committee (JP Patrick Deakins), and Chair of Jail/Law Enforcement Committee (JP Lance Johnson), to address overcrowding as it pertains to COVID. We developed a plan (Phase I Mitigation Project) to use ARPA funding to expand our medical treatment areas, kitchen, intake and release areas, as well as storage to prevent being caught without medical supplies when our next pandemic hits. This would also include construction of enough beds to get detainees who, due to overcrowding and quarantine requirements, are sleeping on the floor on mats. Additionally, it would create sprawl/space for separation. The Phase I Covid Mitigation Project was just to get people off the floor. The real issue is that we are going to have to have a major jail expansion!

We were told by the Court to hire an architect and construction management team to complete Phase I. When the latest ARPA monies were released, the County received \$10 million that was unrestricted. This money was to be used to fund approximately one-half of the cost, then perhaps other ARPA funds

could be used to retrofit and expand areas such as Medical and Booking. We are now being told we will most likely not be able to use any of this funding.

It is amazing to me that the Federal Government would provide this funding for segments of our population in need and for those that are most vulnerable, then intentionally exclude our detention center, which houses over 750 people whose poor decision making and lifestyles make them some of the most vulnerable.

Well, I have a constitutional mandate to ensure the safety and welfare of those housed in our jail, not to mention the welfare of the deputies who never waiver in their commitment to serve in our detention center. I cannot fully meet this mandate without an expansion of our facility and our services! I say, let the people who recognize we have a great criminal justice system, which creates public safety, weigh in on this issue. We can have the greatest law enforcement in the nation, which I believe we do, but without somewhere to house the people they catch breaking the law, public safety will suffer greatly!

- **February 2014** - Quorum Court minutes reporting overcrowding in the Detention Center
- **In 2018**, we brought a comprehensive plan before the Quorum Court for a 700-bed expansion, but the plan was shelved in favor of a comprehensive study of the Washington County Criminal Justice System. Some of the suggestions made are directly related to the operation of the detention facility.
  1. Pre-trial Services within the detention facility - parenting, GED, life skills, job skills, substance abuse treatment. **NOTE: There is zero space available for any type of pre-trial program in the current facility.**
  2. Mental Health Court and Mental Health treatment for incarcerated. **NOTE: There is no place in the current facility to separately house detainees with mental health issues.**
- **In 2018**, we reported releasing an average of 200 detainees a month without requiring a bond. In April of 2022, we released **461 detainees** without requiring a bond.
- Existing facilities were never designed for segregating and quarantining new intakes for COVID (or any other pandemic).
- **2021** - A plan was developed to mitigate the spread of COVID within the congregate setting of the detention facility with the possibility of using ARPA money as the source of funds to pay for the project.
- Based on a number of factors, employee retention and recruitment is at crisis levels. One third of detention positions are unfilled.
- The current detainee population is at 130% of operational capacity.

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