



Genesee County Jail guards missing training in legal dispute; both sides blame each other

Published: Tuesday, October 05, 2010, 9:13 AM Updated: Tuesday, October 05, 2010, 9:16 AM



David Harris | Flint Journal



Robert Pickell

GENESEE COUNTY, Michigan — Genesee County jail guards are missing out on 20 hours of training because of an ongoing legal dispute over a \$12 prisoner booking fee at county jails.

As a result, the head of the Deputy Sheriff's Association of Michigan said the guards are no longer certified — a claim disputed by Genesee County Sheriff Robert Pickell and a state advisory board that oversees jail guard certification.

The dispute stems from a lawsuit by the Deputy Sheriff's Association of Michigan that claims that Genesee County and other sheriff's departments around the state have been using booking fees to pay for overtime instead of training for corrections officers.

The fee has been in place since 2003, but the suit alleges that sheriff's have misused the funds since the start.

Pickell said his department has used the money properly and would be able to use more if not for a 2007 court injunction that has put a freeze on about \$2 million in fees statewide.

"When they free up the money, I'll use it for the 20 hours of training," said Pickell.

Genesee County collected \$487,000 in jail fees between 2003 and 2009 but spent only \$122,000 on training, said Larry Orłowski, executive director of the Deputy Sheriff's Association of Michigan.

Orłowski maintains that more than 90 percent of Genesee County's jail guards were uncertified in 2008 and believes they have missed out on training that includes classes such as how to spot mental illnesses in inmates.

An official with the board that oversees the training calls the claims unfounded.

Jim Reed, executive director for the Michigan Sheriff's Coordinating and Training Council, said its record shows that more than 97 percent of Genesee County's jail guards are certified and said missing out on the 20 hours of training would not change that.

Reed, whose group is also named in the lawsuit, said the court injunction is hurting communities like Genesee County that already don't have enough money to spend for training.

Aric Watts, president of the Genesee County Deputy Sheriff's Association, said his group is not involved in the lawsuit, and he believes the officers are receiving the proper training.

"To me some of the training doesn't make any sense," said Watts. "I'm not sure how they're saying we're not certified."

Orłowski said the training is essential for the deputies to complete their jobs and for their safety.

"There are significant incidents in inmate injuries and more significant incidents of corrections officer injuries in jail," Orłowski said. "Because the mental institutes are closing, it's a very dangerous environment, especially if you aren't prepared for it. It's either the inmate that is going to get injured or the corrections officer is going to get injured."

© 2010 MLive.com. All rights reserved.