

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Ramsey County Jail moves inmates after DOC order  
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CATHY WURZER: Other news, some inmates at the Ramsey County Jail are on their way to new jails today following an emergency order from state inspectors that requires Sheriff Bob Fletcher to cut the number of people held at the facility. The move follows a monthslong battle between Fletcher and the county board over the budget for the facility and findings that the county was failing to keep inmates safe. Tim Nelson's been following the story. He joins us right now.

Hey, Tim.

**TIM NELSON:** Hi, Cathy.

**CATHY WURZER:** So as you know, we talked with the Department of Corrections Commissioner Paul Schnell yesterday here on the program. But for those of-- for folks who are catching up, what is going on at the Ramsey County Jail?

**TIM NELSON:** Well, Ramsey County is one of the biggest jails in the state. It was built 20 years ago in Saint Paul, 500-bed facility for people awaiting criminal trial in Ramsey County courts and for people arrested and awaiting trial or a transfer to a mental health facility or even to a state prison. The issue isn't the number of beds there. It's the number of people who work there.

Inmates can't be left unattended for their own safety, for the safety of others, medical emergencies, a whole host of reasons. The trouble is there aren't enough staff. And that means, in particular, there aren't enough to handle the transfers to medical facilities nearby, like Regions Hospital or the Healthpartners Specialty Center. That means people with serious medical conditions aren't getting timely treatment.

Staffing at the jail has been an issue for a long time. And Ramsey County Public Health and the County Board and the sheriff's office have been discussing it over weeks and months. But the county board recently decided that they needed to bring in the state for an inspection. That led to a review of jail operations and this order last Friday requiring the county to reduce its jail capacity to about 320 people with the staff they have on hand.

**CATHY WURZER:** Which is about, what, 60 inmates are finding other places to go, is that right?

**TIM NELSON:** Yeah, round about that. Yeah.

**CATHY WURZER:** About that. OK. Sure. So, OK, what prompted the emergency order?

**TIM NELSON:** Well, there were a variety of medical situations that had come up. An inmate suffered a suspected stroke, a condition that requires quick intervention, had to wait an hour or more to be taken to a hospital. There's another inmate that had been in a car accident, and health providers said jail staff denied the inmate a medical screening.

Now by law, jailers are responsible for the people in their custody, so they have to care for them. And the county could be legally liable. They could get sued if they don't.

And this also comes on the heels of some high-profile cases that we've covered here at MPR, including the death of Beltrami County inmate Hardel Sherrell in 2018 due to an untreated medical condition. So state officials said this number-- it's 324 inmates-- that's the most people Ramsey County can take care of given the staffing they currently have. And that means the jail has to find somewhere else for the rest of these inmates to go.

**CATHY** Sheriff Fletcher's long complained about the staffing shortage. How did it get this bad?

**WURZER:**

**TIM NELSON:** Well, part of it's the tight job market everywhere. Also, inmate counts are kept low during COVID. They're rebounding now. So there's this gap between staff and need. I talked to Sheriff Fletcher earlier this morning a little bit more about this.

**BOB FLETCHER:** We have a record number of homicide suspects that we're keeping. We have 48 people that are mentally ill that should probably be moved to other facilities that the state has failed to open. And we have another 28 that should be at the state. They haven't been sentenced, but they haven't been moved yet because they have local charges. So there's a variety of-- there's a mixture of reasons that the numbers are high.

**TIM NELSON:** The next of a long, long, decades-long political struggle between Bob Fletcher and the county board. They've battled each other in court repeatedly over budgets. And the county manager said today that the sheriff's office has exceeded its budget last year by more than \$2 million. Fletcher's even sued the board in the past for not giving him enough money, and he's won a partial victory for some budget autonomy in the past.

**CATHY** Yeah, I remember that. So what's next?

**WURZER:**

**TIM NELSON:** Well, as you said, they're cutting the number of people in the jail as of today. They're moving some inmates to the county workhouse, women mostly, others are being moved to jails elsewhere in the state, where Ramsey County is essentially renting bed space for the time being. Fletcher says he's going to also submit a supplemental budget request for 10 additional corrections officers, six more people to transfer inmates to medical care and other out-of-custody situations.

We'll see if he gets that, if the county board gives it to him. The county commissioners met today. They're very angry. They threatened to revoke some of the budget autonomy they provide the sheriff. They said they would consider bi-monthly audits of his spending, and they are going to start demanding regular written reports of what's going on at the jail.

**CATHY** All right. Well, thank you, Tim Nelson. Appreciate the report.

**WURZER:**

**TIM NELSON:** You bet.