



Jailbirds bring jail jobs to Santa Rosa

Inmate facilities bring employment, profits

Louis Cooper • lcooper@pnj.com • March 18, 2010

The business of keeping bad guys behind bars is on the verge of exploding in Santa Rosa County.

Work has been completed on a 128-bed expansion at the county jail in East Milton, and the 2,000-bed private Blackwater River Correctional Facility is set to open this summer. Add to that the existing 2,818-inmate state Santa Rosa Correctional Institute and Annex and the 500 beds already at the jail, and it's easy to see why demand for jailers in Milton is taking off.

Currently, at the jail and the state prison, about 743 people are employed as correctional officers. The new Blackwater prison and the expansion at the jail could add a combined 248 officers to those ranks.

The new jobs are a boon to the local economy, said Cindy Anderson, executive director of the TEAM Santa Rosa Economic Development Council.

The Blackwater project "represents new money coming into the economy. A large project of this nature has a huge impact, as hundreds of new jobs are created and more than \$120 million in capital investment is injected into the local economy."

Corrections, in general, is a growth industry, she said.

"Unfortunately, there isn't a much-more-sustainable industry," Anderson said. "As population grows, so

does the amount of people needing to be detained."

In 2008, the most recent year for which data is available, about 1,550 people in Santa Rosa County were employed in corrections and law enforcement, earning a combined \$56 million, according to information from TEAM.

Demand up for jailers

The demand spurt, however, may put a crunch on the existing facilities.

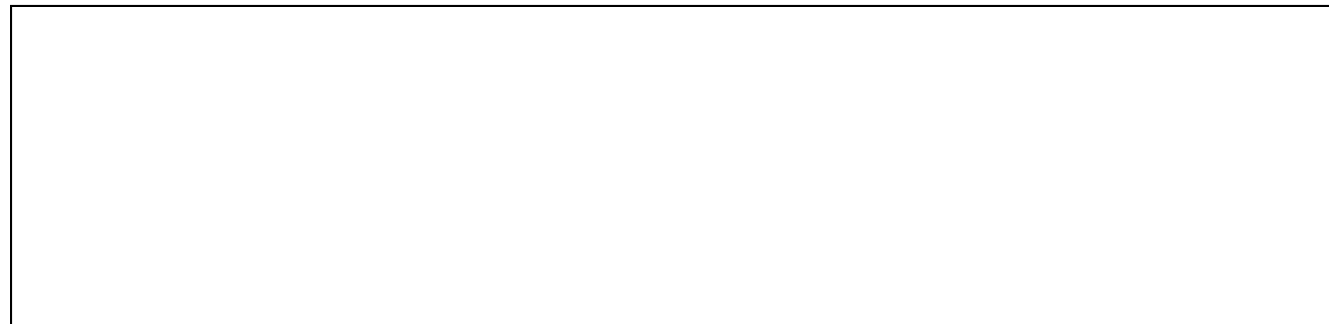
The expansion at the jail will require eight new correctional officers, said Santa Rosa Sheriff's Office Detention Administrator Maj. Paul Campbell. Normally, the Sheriff's Office looks to hire detention deputies who already have been certified by the state, but that may not be possible because of the growing local demand.

"Once we begin hiring these positions ... if we cannot fill them with certified deputies and have to hire noncertified, the sheriff will pay (the \$1,800 cost) for them to be certified," Campbell said. "They would normally pay themselves, but due to the supply-and-demand issue with the private prison coming online, we more than likely will be forced to go this route."

Susan Nelms, executive director of Workforce Escarosa, said the employment agency is seeing a surge in people interested in corrections.

"We think there are a lot of individuals who are interested in correctional-officer occupations," Nelms said. "Certified ... officers are a demand occupation in our region, and we have begun partnering with these agencies to provide the funding for individuals to be trained as correctional

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officers."

Pay competition

The private Blackwater River Correctional Facility has a contract with the state to house 2,000 medium- and close-custody male inmates with chronic medical and mental health problems.

"Blackwater River Correctional Facility is scheduled to be completed by June 30, 2010," said Gregory Johnson, construction project manager for The GEO Group, the Boca Raton-based company building the prison. "The GEO Group is working closely with Workforce Escarosa to receive applications for correctional officer positions who must meet state ... certification standards set forth by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement."

Campbell worries that the private facility could provide an attractive alternative to the county jail because it will likely pay more. Starting correctional officers — called detention deputies at the jail — earn about \$29,660 annually. At the state prison, trainee officers earn about \$28,007 annually, while certified officers start at about \$30,807.

Johnson declined to say how much correctional officers at Blackwater will earn. According to tentative information GEO has provided to Workforce Escarosa, those jobs could begin at about \$30,000 annually, Nelms said.

"We've been working with the GEO Group to perform outreach and recruitment services," she said. "On our Web site we have the GEO Group posted and have had more than 320 potential candidates who have expressed interest in these positions."

The current average hourly wage in Santa Rosa County is \$14.64 per hour, according to TEAM Santa Rosa. That's about \$30,451 annually.

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