

Help eases St. Lucie County Jail crowding

By Will Greenlee

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FORT PIERCE — Dressed in blue inmate garb, Jon Ford says he's spent 20 years behind bars "because of my addiction," but credits a program at the St. Lucie County jail for helping turn his life around.

Ford, 38, spoke passionately on Thursday of a commitment to change as part of a news conference in which local officials with a contentious history over jail crowding discussed programs they say have helped create a downward trend in the inmate count.

"When I came in here I wanted to change who I was," said Ford, who said he's been to prison six times. "I didn't want to go back out there the same person that I was. I made a decision to come in this program to change that."

Sheriff Ken Mascara, Public Defender Diamond Litty and County Commission Chairman Joe Smith took turns behind a podium lauding six programs they credit with helping keep the inmate population down.

The average daily inmate population this year reached its highest in July, with 1,585 inmates, though has declined each subsequent month to 1,324 in November. The number Thursday was 1,333, which includes 54 federal inmates that the sheriff's office is being paid to house. The jail is supposed to have 1,370 beds, though officials added about 300 more beds.

Litty and Stuart attorney Bob Watson filed a lawsuit in February 2006 on behalf of several inmates claiming jail crowding violated the inmates' civil rights and caused several problems, such as limited access to medical treatment, improper screening of inmates for mental health issues and trouble with plumbing, fire hazards, food services and security.

Litty said after the lawsuit was filed, the second jail pod and mental health court were opened. The first jail pod opened in 2005.

"We couldn't even have mental health court, we couldn't do all the re-entry initiatives when people were sleeping on top of each other," Litty said.

Mascara called the programs, detailed on posters propped up beside him, a "success

story of all of us working together and reducing our jail population" and making the jail "a model for other jails in the state." He said opening the two pods helped allow officials to implement some of the programs.

"We couldn't do that before because we were so overpopulated," Mascara said.

Janice Hurst, 29, was jailed most recently in November, though the mother of six said she's been arrested more than a dozen times — sometimes two to three times a month. Hurst, who's been in and out of rehab since she was 18, gave high marks to the help she's getting.

"I feel more support coming from my peers in here, and it's amazing how people can come together in a jail to get so much help," she said. "I have more self-awareness now than I did when I was in the other programs."

Still, Hurst said she's scared about what's going to happen when she gets out.

"It's all up to me, but I'm getting more out of the program than I did the other ones, I guess because I'm putting more into it," she said.



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