

Sending Hunterdon Inmates to Somerset County Yields Savings, Sheriff Says

In an era of rising costs, how is it possible that this year's [\\$87.78 million county budget](#) is nearly \$1 million less than last year's?

Part of the answer: Shared services, and that includes jail consolidation.

Hunterdon has a contractual arrangement with Somerset County to house Hunterdon's inmates.

The process began in 2015. Although Hunterdon County Chief of Staff George Wagner said the jail population was in decline, the jail's annual operating costs were about \$4.8 million.

"Our existing jail expenses have decreased each year," Wagner said told Hunterdon Freeholders at their July 17 meeting.

In 2016, the cost of housing inmates in Somerset County was \$2.691 million. Last year, that fell to \$2.036 million, a savings of more than \$655,000, according to Hunterdon Sheriff Fred Brown.

Wagner said that not only have operating costs been cut, but staff has been reduced and "costly legacy benefits" such as police and fire pensions and medical benefits have also been trimmed, while at the same time avoiding the need for capital improvements to the Hunterdon Jail facility.

Brown said Hunterdon's jail population at the Somerset Jail continue to fall.

"Our inmate population has declined from an average (daily) of 74 in 2017 to 54 in 2017," he told Hunterdon Freeholders. This year's daily average is about 55, he said.

Some challenges remain, Brown said, including medical security and pharmacy. But, "This would still be a challenge if our jail were to be reopened," he said. "We would still have to provide both."

Brown said Hunterdon police chiefs initially opposed sending Hunterdon inmates to Somerset County, but they've since come to support the plan.

Wagner said he's asked Freeholders to request their Facilities Committee "to proceed with exploring alternatives" for what to do with the Hunterdon jail. In the interim, "We are removing the fencing and razor ribbon on the perimeter of the building," Wagner said, "to lessen its profile in the neighborhood."