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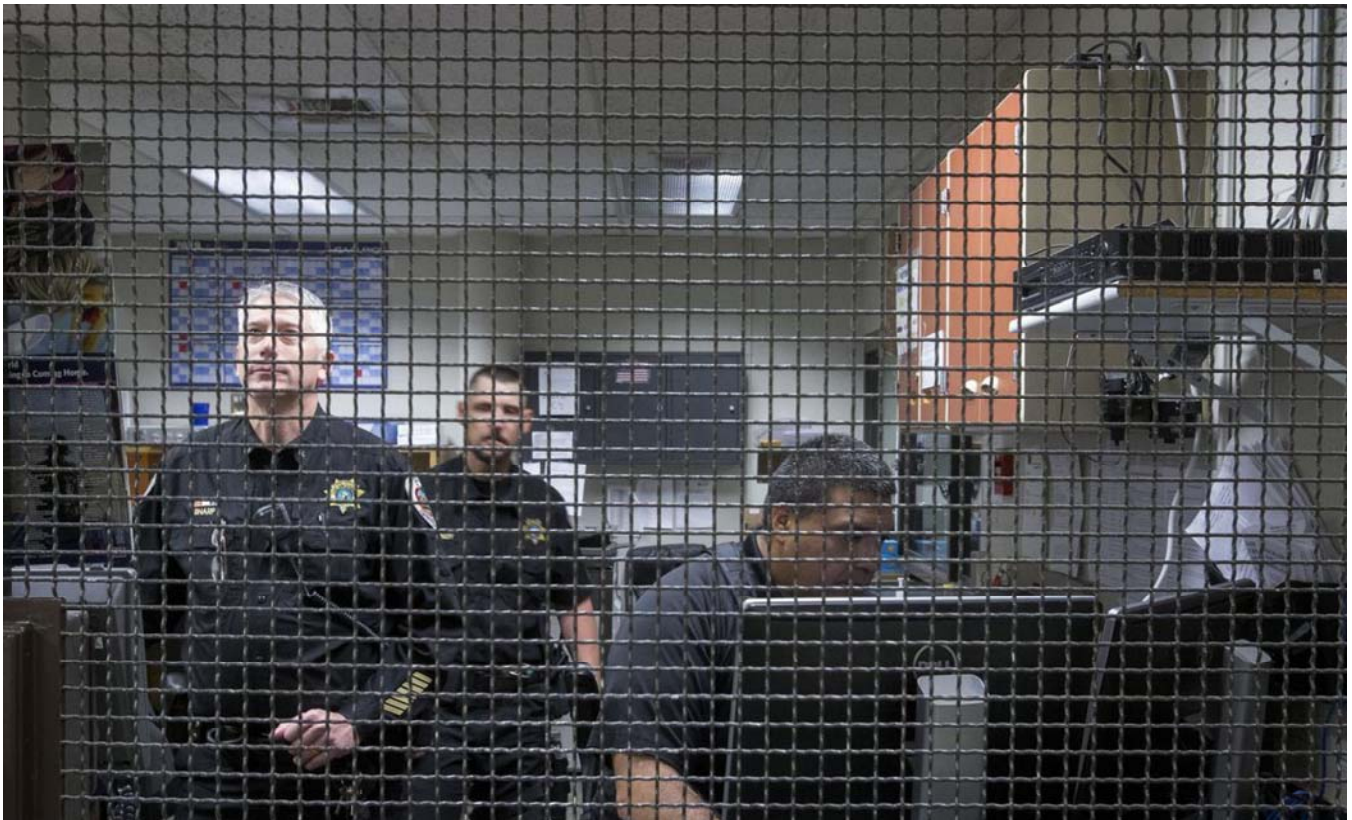
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A history of neglect

By Tony Buhr
World staff writer Jun 19, 2019





WENATCHEE — The Chelan County Regional Justice Center has undergone a lot of turmoil and change.

In the last three years the county has hired a temporary jail director, faced potential lawsuits over its conditions and been investigated by state agencies for safety concerns.

In June 2018, Director Curt Lutz stepped down from his position and was replaced by Interim Jail Director Bill Larson. The Chelan County Commission tasked Larson with doing an analysis of conditions at the jail. He will step down from his position in December.

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Lutz's resignation may have been caused by talks between the union and County Administrator Cathy Mulhall in May, 2018, Chief Deputy Sean Larsen. The union gave the county an ultimatum, threatening to sue if conditions weren't improved, Larsen said. Larsen was the union chair at that time.

"There was a time under the previous director where he just refused to meet with us for almost a year," Larsen said. "He just got tired of hearing the whining if you will. It was tough and we were at a point where we were done. One way or another this was going to have to get addressed."

The Wenatchee World reached out to Lutz for comment, but didn't receive a response.

Past directors have allowed the jail to decay without letting county commissioners know about the extent of the problem, Larsen said. He believes they might have felt that the Chelan County Commission didn't want to hear bad news or they thought expensive updates were unattainable.

"We didn't feel like previous administrators were really being transparent and honest with the commission," Larsen said. "(But) these are the facts and that was what our urging was over the years, just tell them the truth."

The state Department of Labor and Industries has also fined the county over safety concerns.

In 2017 the county was fined \$4,800 for several violations including lacking “technological and economically feasible ways” of preventing inmate assaults. The report recommended doing some of the following:



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- Expanding video surveillance to all areas where employees and inmates are together
- Increasing safety training for the staff
- Improving the PA system

The 2017 report also highlighted broken and missing tiles in showers, chipped and peeling paint and the floor buckling in the kitchen walk-in fridge. The county appealed the fine and it was reduced to \$3,800.

According to the 2017 report from Labor and Industries, the jail

In June 2015, the jail was fined \$600 for one serious and four general violations, according to Labor and Industries reports. The fine included infractions such as not providing an eyewash station for hazardous chemicals, not making sure employees had hepatitis B vaccinations and not providing training on hazardous chemicals.

Business proposal

In October, Interim Director Bill Larson released a “business proposal” highlighting the condition of the jail to the Chelan County Commission.

According to the proposal, assaults between inmates at the jail were common, drugs ran rampant, 60 percent of the inmates suffered from mental health problems and alcohol was regularly manufactured. The jail also faces a staffing shortage and the proposal recommended creating 15 new positions.



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According to the proposal, to improve conditions the county needed to:

- Put cameras in every cell in the jail. At the moment only the cells in isolation, booking and some hallways have cameras.
- Add cuff ports into the cell doors so officers could handcuff inmates before opening doors.
- Purchase a body scanner to detect the presence of drugs in body cavities, according to the report.

The staff also needs to start receiving regular training. The staff hadn't received regular safety training for years, Larsen said.

What has happened since

Since Larson's October business proposal the jail has made some progress, but continues to struggle.

The jail's staffing shortage has gotten worse, Larson said during an April County Commission meeting. Correctional officers have left the jail to work for other institutions, creating about six vacant positions.

The jail has also implemented a cleaning program to improve the condition within its cells, Larson said. The jail purchased about \$3,000 worth of cleaning supplies for the individual cells and created an award system, Larsen said.



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If inmates clean each day they receive a weekly award like an extra hamburger, Larsen said. If they don't they can lose privileges like access to the TV.

Tony Buhr

Environment, county and health reporter

Tony Buhr has been a professional reporter for almost seven years. He worked for the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin as a cops and courts reporter. The Ellensburg Daily Records as a cops and courts, breaking news, agriculture and water reporter.

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