

Rockbridge Considers New Jail As Overcrowding Persist

Rockbridge and Alleghany counties might build a joint jail to deal with rampant overcrowding and understaffing. In the meantime, new programs are trying to help inmates build skills to keep them from ending back up in jail when they are released.



Lexington, Va. – December 11, 2022: A new outdoor classroom is under construction at the Rockbridge Regional Jail. Officials want to teach many skilled trades to inmates once the construction is complete.

LEXINGTON (Va) – For more than two decades, officials at the Rockbridge Regional Jail have been calling for a facility to be built to help with overcrowding. Their calls might finally be heard.

A new study kicked off two weeks ago that is looking into whether the Rockbridge Regional Jail should be renovated and if there should be a “superregional” or “quasi-regional” jail in conjunction with the Alleghany Regional Jail.

Both the Alleghany and Rockbridge jails are holding roughly twice the number of inmates each was built to hold in the 1980s. The jails are also coping with long-standing staffing shortages.

A New Jail

Under a “superregional” jail plan, the Rockbridge and Alleghany jails would close and all the inmates would go to one new, larger, facility. Similarly, with the “quasi-regional” plan, the two jails would renovate their existing

facilities and build smaller add-ons to current facilities to deal with overcrowding. Also, either jail can also choose to act independently of one another.

PDF TO JAIL PLAN

Staffing shortages

The Rockbridge jail has not been fully staffed for at least two years according to the Chief of Inmate Services, Chad Hamilton. Understaffing has made addressing the needs of inmates slower, like cleaning laundry and serving meals.

“We got the same amount of officers taking care of double the number of inmates,” Hamilton said. “The understaffing puts a big toll on the staff because of the needs we still have to maintain.”

To address this, the jail superintendent, Derek Almarode, pledged to provide more benefits and pay raises to staff and was successful.

“[Pay] has jumped up a good bit in the last two or three years trying to attract people into our facility,” Hamilton said. “We just got a bigger raise and approved by the board.”

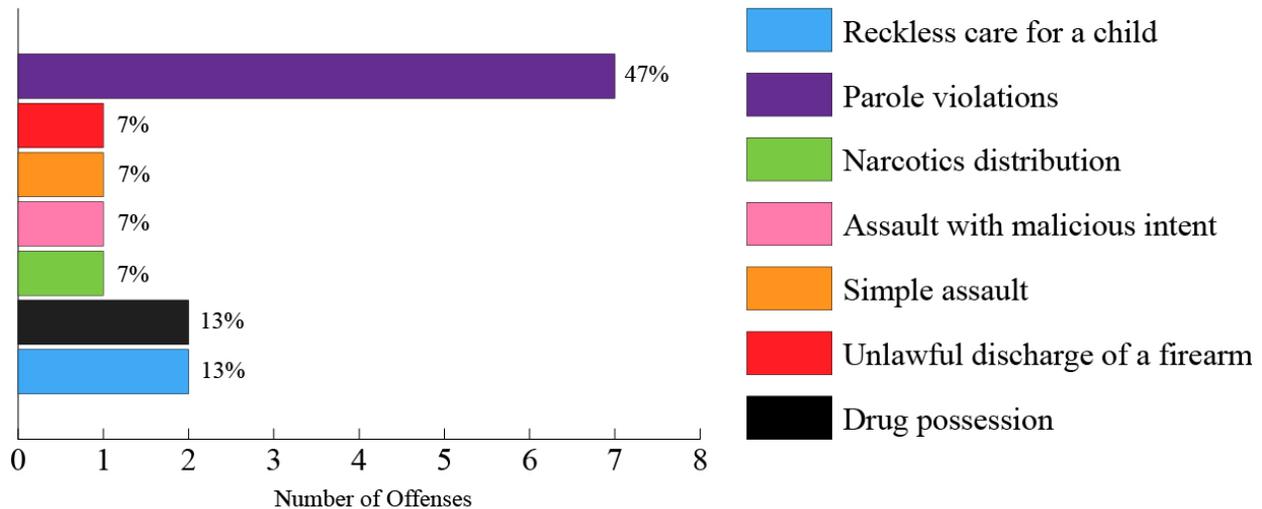


Lexington, Va. – December 8, 2022: The outside of the Rockbridge Regional Jail on a December afternoon. Officials at the jail are hoping to attract more people to work because they are understaffed by at least six positions.

Overcrowding

There are between 120 and 130 annually in the Rockbridge jail, despite its originally being built to hold 56. This overcrowding is driven largely by high numbers of repeat offenders, usually for probation violations and drug-related crimes. The recidivism rate is 85% according to internal prison data.

Recidivism Crimes November 1-November 15, 2022



From November 1-15, there were 15 repeat offenders. Of those repeat offenders, nearly half were for parole violations. Data for this graphic is courtesy of the Rockbridge Regional Jail.

“Local jails are both trying hard to provide the services that people incarcerated need, both mental health [and] substance abuse. There’s just nowhere near the funds to do it adequately,” head public defender for Southwest Virginia, Peter Boatner, said.

Coupled with high recidivism rates, some state prisons have closed [recently](#), placing a larger burden on local jails to house inmates. As a result, tight living conditions have caused conflict and even violence between inmates.

“Everybody’s more confined and short-tempered stepping all over each other,” former inmate and now peer counselor at the jail, Thomas Whitlock, said.

And these problems of overcrowding are not unique to the Rockbridge Regional Jail. The current inmate population at the Alleghany Regional Jail is 111, even though the jail was built for 56 inmates.

This isn’t a new problem

The jail has had its fair share of issues with overcrowding, prison conditions, and inmate injuries in the past.

In 2021, the former Rockbridge jail superintendent, John Higgins, was [sentenced](#) to 51 months in federal prison for fraud and for failing to provide an inmate with medical treatment and protect that inmate from physical abuse from other inmates.



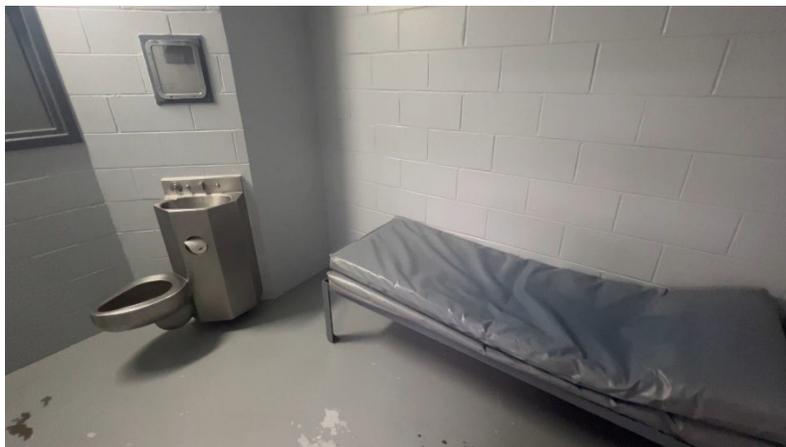
Lexington, Va. – May 11, 2021: John Higgins, a former Rockbridge County Regional Jail superintendent, was convicted in 2021 for accepting bribes and denying inmates medical care. The Rockbridge jail has changed its policies to ensure more accountability.

In addition, overcrowding has been so extreme that inmates had to sleep on the floor of jail [cells](#).

Hamilton said that both issues have been dealt with. The jail’s policies have been “rewritten” to prevent a case like Higgins’s from happening again. Also, for two years, “everyone [has been] off the floor,” and had a bed to sleep in.

Inmate advocacy groups are still pushing for broader criminal justice reforms by sharing the stories of people behind bars and pushing for better living conditions in prisons and jails.

“People also don’t realize that... in prison, people are usually working for pennies an hour,” The Humanization Project co-founder, Gin Carter, said. “It’s basically slave labor.”



Lexington, Va. – December 8, 2022: Cells inside the Rockbridge Regional Jail are cramped and lack privacy. Officials think a new jail facility could help address issues of overcrowding and conflicts from tight living quarters.

Moving forward

The problems with staffing, overcrowding, and services in jail have motivated jail and city officials alike to advocate for new facilities.

“I do think a new facility would definitely benefit the community and inmates here,” Hamilton said. “It would give the door for better and bigger things because we can design it to fit our needs from the start.”

“Some of the motivations [are] serving our communities better, [spending] less money, having facilities and activities that serve our members of our community who are incarcerated,” Lexington City Manager Jim Halasz said last Wednesday.

Ten years ago, a similar study recommended that the city construct a new jail facility, but no action was taken by the city. It is unclear if the city would act this time. Leaders would have to balance the cost of the jail with other potential projects.

“We’re looking at a possible new high school... a new jail or renovation... tens of millions of dollars worth of upgrades and renovations on our wastewater treatment plant... a renovation of City Hall,” Halasz said. “These are all multimillion-dollar projects likely to occur in the next three to seven years.”

In the meantime

As the study about building a new jail takes place, new programs are aiming to help inmates reenter society successfully.

Thomas Whitlock was the first inmate to complete the jail’s welding and carpentry programs. He was released in August after four years for meth possession. He now is a peer counselor for inmates and will also be a welding instructor when the construction of a new outdoor classroom is complete.

“I was locked up here for four years... if I can help one person stay out of jail then I am making a difference,” Whitlock said. “When that classroom gets done, I’ll be teaching a class every day.”



Lexington, Va. – December 12, 2022: An outdoor carpentry workshop is a place where inmates can work towards becoming certified. Officials think programs like this will help reduce recidivism.



Lexington, Va. – December 10, 2022: Once a new outdoor classroom is complete, jail officials think they will be able to offer a wide array of classes to inmates. Officials are hopeful it will drive down the rate of repeat offenders.

Hamilton wants to offer even more classes once the classroom is built.

“We are gonna try to teach the guys just basic electrical, basic car, carpentry, welding, different trades... that may inspire them to enjoy that field and venture out and get a job,” Hamilton said.

The study into possible new facilities got started in October. It will take between 12 and 18 months before a report is issued.