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[September 11, 2009]

Planners near final steps toward completion of Jack Harwell Detention Center [Waco Tribune-Herald, Texas]

(Waco Tribune-Herald (TX) Via Acquire Media NewsEdge) Sep. 11--As construction nears completion on the new Jack Harwell Detention Center on State Highway 6, the private detention company that will run it is finalizing plans for its opening.

The 816-bed facility being built by Community Education Centers of New Jersey is expected to be completed by December. Warden Mike Wilson, who heads the private downtown jail in Waco and another CEC facility in Falls County, can hardly wait.

   "It's big and shiny and new," Wilson said. "We're all excited about it." The Jack Harwell Detention Center will offer more space and efficiency than the downtown jail allows, Wilson said. For example, the new jail will hold up to 84 inmates in the booking area, compared to just 10 at the downtown jail.

The Harwell Detention Center also will create a smoother way to transport inmates within the jail.

"Say you want to move an inmate at the downtown jail, and he may be on the fourth floor or something. You have to send an escort officer up there to get him, take him down to the first floor or wherever he's going, and summon another officer to receive him," Wilson said. "At the new jail, the jailer assigned to a

corridor just takes the inmate from his cell to the crash gate at the end of the corridor and drops him off with the jailer there, then he goes back to his post." Some of the design elements in the new jail were borrowed from the neighboring McLennan County Jail on State Highway 6. The larger booking area, which includes two cells in which inmates are directly placed from the outside vehicle transport area, was borrowed from the county jail.

The new jail includes a separate secured corridor for female inmates, equipped with a separate activity yard and classrooms, which Wilson said should avoid problems the county has had in the past in ensuring proper space for female inmates.

"You always want to improve on the jail design of an existing facility when you build a new one," said Wilson, who had a role in the opening of two jails by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice during his 30-year career as a warden for the state prison system. "We looked at different jails, and some of the concepts from the county jail on some from other places and improved on them." Much still needs to be completed before the jail is ready to open. The furniture and electronic equipment have not been ordered yet, except for metal bunk beds and picnic-size tables in the eight- and 16-bed dormitory cells.

The Texas Commission on Jail Standards will do a walk-through of the rooms today to determine the exact placement of the furniture in the cells, and construction workers will bolt the pieces to the floor.

Black numbers are written on blue strips of tape to label the rooms and are the only marks distinguishing the empty front offices from the medical exam rooms. Dust and sand cover the floors. Red, green and blue power lines snake around the corridors to workers installing the floor in cell bathrooms. Some of the steel crash gates that will seal off different corridors remain in pieces in the hallway awaiting installation.

Once jail builder Hale-Mills Construction gives a definite date for completion of the jail, CEC heads will develop a timeline of steps to finish before the jail opens, Wilson said.

"Once we have a final date for when it will be completely done and turned over to us, we start developing our timeline backwards," Wilson said. "So if the date is Dec. 15, and we have to order furniture 60 days ahead of time, we track backwards to that date and create our timeline." Though the jail is expected to be turned over to CEC for use in December, it may be late January to early February before any inmates are housed at the facility. The jail must hire 170 staff members in the coming months to operate the jail, and jailers will have to be state-certified and complete weeks of on-site training at the facility.

"We have to make sure that the jailers know the right procedures in this space

and how to operate this facility, which includes knowing all the equipment and security measures in place," Wilson said. "We will not put one inmate over here if we have not done all our training." A food services contract for inmate meals has not been set yet.

McLennan County Judge Jim Lewis said the county will create a food services bid to serve both the county jail and the Jack Harwell Detention Center, which will share the new jail's kitchen. CEC still will pay for its inmate meals, though the contract will be through the county, Lewis said.

"If CEC has 500 inmates and we have 500 inmates, we'll both be paying for 1,500 meals each day," Lewis said. "However many meals they have each day, they will pay for it, and we will pay for the rest." One of the last steps will be installing video visitation monitors in the jail. Monitors will be placed in the 16-bed cells, while six portable monitors will float to the 96 single-cell units and 24 high-security inmate areas. The visitation center will be finished in October and will first be used by inmates at the county jail, Wilson said.

"That will be the last thing we put in, after they finish everything else," Wilson said. "That's a lot of pricey equipment that we don't want to mess up." To see more of the Waco Tribune-Herald, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to http://www.wacotrib.com (http://www.wacotrib.com).

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