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Judge sides with Executive Ficano and orders cutbacks at jails

Acknowledging the dire economic times, Wayne Circuit Judge Michael Sapala ordered reductions in inmate population and staffing levels in the county jail system Thursday.

The judge ordered a reduction of 512 beds and 84 staff positions, a decision that could eventually save the county about \$6 million a year. The reductions will occur at two jails in downtown Detroit and the Dickerson Detention Facility in Hamtramck. About 28 sheriff's deputies will be laid off.

With the reductions, the county jail capacity will be 2,076 beds.

The judge also ordered increased reporting from the sheriff to the county executive regarding inmate population, staffing, overtime and quality assurance. Other sheriff's services that are not included in the consent order are subject to budget cuts.

In October, Sheriff Warren Evans filed a lawsuit against County Executive Robert Ficano, claiming budget cutbacks violated a court consent decree issued in the 1970s. The order established inmate and staffing levels to protect the rights of prisoners.

Sapala said the sheriff would have to look for ways to run the operation more efficiently.

Said Sapala: "In governmental units that are, by law, required to balance their budgets – no function of government is immune to cuts in service and personnel. The sheriff is no exception."

During the litigation, the sheriff's department has been overspending its budget by about \$1 million a month, Assistant Deputy County Executive William Wolfson said.

The budget is the responsibility of the executive and legislative branches of government and not the courts, said Wolfson.

"I am very pleased the judge agrees with our position that substantial cuts needed to be made," Executive Ficano said. "The judge sent a powerful message to the sheriff that we must live within our means and learn to do more with less."

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