

## Jail Overcrowded? Tents Might be at Least Part of the Solution

By Brevard County Sheriff  
Jack Parker

With more than 1,700 inmates and only 1,040 beds, the Brevard County Jail was one of the most overcrowded jails in the state of Florida.

The cost of building 700 beds and the supporting infrastructure could easily surpass \$60 million, but Brevard County did not have that kind of money in jail reserves and would have needed a successful jail referendum for the funding. Unfortunately, Brevard County has a history of failed jail referendums – four in a row to be exact.

We listened to what the citizens were telling us. They wanted us to think outside of the box and come up with an “affordable” jail expansion. But how could we build the beds we needed at a fraction of the price? The solution we came up with? Tents. We could reduce construction costs by including Sprung (manufacturer) jail tents as part of the plan.

I know at first the sound of housing inmates in tents sounds strange. We had heard good things about the Sprung tents already being used to house inmates from Sheriff Bob White in Pasco County and Sheriff Mike Scott in Lee County. We also had learned that they were being used successfully for military operations in the Middle East.



Sheriff Jack Parker outside of his new Jail Tent Complex



At left, jail inmates helped build their own tents. Right photo, inmates move in.



As a result, we created a plan that included four large tents designed to house 400 lower-risk offenders, in addition to a new, traditional pod holding 288 inmates with mental-health and medical needs. The total of 688 additional beds will increase our bed count to 1,728, and the completed project is expected to cost less than one-third of what traditional construction could have cost, saving millions of tax dollars. The decision to use tents as part of the project was the single-largest factor in reducing the cost and alleviating the need of going to referendum.

Tents may not be the answer to every correctional need. In my opinion, they are best used for lower-risk inmates. It also is important to remember that lower-risk inmates do not mean non-risk inmates. If your county is considering them, I would

recommend surrounding them with medium- to maximum-rated security fencing and extensive video surveillance to discourage that occasional escape attempt.

Since the tents have been completed, I have received only positive comments about their use. Correctional Officers like the openness of the interior that allows direct supervision and better visibility of inmates. Citizens who like the thought of inmates being housed in lower-cost facilities often tell me, “If tents are good enough for our service men and women then they are more than good enough for our inmates.” It is a sentiment I agree with.

If you would like to visit BCSO's tents, or have any questions, contact BCSO Commander Susan Jeter 321-690-1503, or e-mail: [susan.jeter@bcso.us](mailto:susan.jeter@bcso.us). ★