

# The Star-Ledger

## Union County says it may close its jail in effort to cut costs

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NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published March 26, 2020

Union County said it is considering shuttering its county jail as local governments statewide consider ways to save money amid a decreasing number of inmates.

A county spokesman said officials have met repeatedly with leaders from the local corrections union to discuss the possible closure.

“We are always looking at ways at making County Government more efficient, and one of the steps has involved an examination of the operations of our jail,” County Manager Ed Oatman said in a statement. “While nothing has been finalized, we have been in several conversations with the state and other counties on employment opportunities for corrections officers and civilians at the jail if we decide to proceed.”

He did not say where Union County inmates would be transferred if the jail in Elizabeth closes.

A representative for PBA Local 199 declined comment.

While state prisons generally hold people convicted of serious crimes, county jails house those awaiting trial or convicted of lesser offenses.

The jail population can change rapidly. Union’s jail dropped to 280 inmates a year ago before ticking up to 431 by December, according to the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey and court records.

The number of inmates statewide has decreased since New Jersey largely eliminated cash bail, and populations dropped further during the pandemic because of mass releases and fewer arrests.

In addition, the state Supreme Court recently paved the way for more people awaiting trial behind bars to be released.

Union has long weighed closing its facility. In 2014, officials discussed transferring inmates to nearby Hudson County.

Closing the jail could mean layoffs which would disproportionately affect Black and Latino men and women, local activist Salaam Ismial, director of the advocacy organization National United Youth Council Inc., told NJ Advance Media.

In September, Union County officers protested a similar proposal further south, after Cumberland County moved to close its jail and transfer inmates to neighboring facilities.

Cumberland's plan has led to a months-long court battle to stop the closure. Public defenders sided with the local union, arguing that transferring inmates would make it difficult for lawyers to meet with clients.