

Opinion: The Breaking Point of Maine's County Jails

As a Maine County Sheriff, my primary duty is to ensure public safety and the humane care of those in our custody. However, our ability to fulfill this mission is being pushed to a breaking point by a funding system that is fundamentally broken. We are trapped between a rigid state cap on property taxes and a state government that has failed to keep its end of the bargain.

In 2021, when county jail operation cost ran about \$100 million, the state legislature set the **County Jail Operations Fund at roughly \$20.4 million**. That allocation has remained frozen for five years, even as the actual costs of operating our facilities have skyrocketed due to historic inflation. Today, this state contribution covers **less than 15%** of our total operational costs, leaving local property taxpayers to shoulder the remaining 85%.

A Growing Gap on the Backs of Homeowners

The math simply does not work. While the Maine Department of Corrections has seen its budget increase by 19% over three budget cycles, county jails have been left to starve. Because of the state-imposed cap on the property tax assessment for correctional services, we have little authority to raise the revenue needed to meet state-mandated standards.

Counties across Maine—including Washington, Penobscot, and Waldo—have already exhausted their reserve funds just to keep the doors open. In Penobscot County alone, the jail faced a **\$3.5 million shortfall** by the start of 2025. When these reserves run dry, counties are forced to hike taxes on municipalities, leading to double-digit property tax increases that hurt our residents.

More Than Just "Inmates"

The challenges we face are not just about numbers; they are about the people we are tasked with managing. We are increasingly serving a much larger and more unhealthy population. Our jails have become the default mental health and substance use treatment centers of last resort.

- **Mental Health and Substance Use:** Inmates with these disorders often stay in our facilities for longer periods, requiring intensive medical and behavioral health services.
- **Rising Medical Costs:** Healthcare is one of our fastest-growing expenses. For example, Penobscot County recently spent nearly **\$2.5 million annually** on medical care for inmates.

- **Labor Shortages:** To recruit and retain staff, we must compete with rising wages in the private sector. In some cases, jail staff were earning only what they could make at a fast-food restaurant until recent, desperate pay raises.

The Path Forward

The state dictates approximately **80% of the incarceration process**—from passing the laws that lead to arrests to setting the operational standards for our facilities. It is only fair that the state provides a share of funding that reflects this level of control.

An advisory panel recently recommended an **\$8 million increase** in annual state funding to help alleviate this crisis. Without this adjustment to keep up with inflation and the specialized needs of our current population, we will continue to fail our staff, our inmates, and the property taxpayers who are being forced to pay for a system the state refuses to adequately fund.