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Impacts of Reduced Community Jail Funding and Bed-Count Realignment

Overview

The Legislature has directed the Department of Corrections (DOC) to renegotiate FY27 community jail contracts by reducing bed counts where average unused capacity exceeds 60% (FY24–FY25). The intent language frames this as a “realignment” to maintain operations while reducing cost. In fact, this would result in the closure of the majority of community jails, shifting costs to the Department of Public Safety.

To elucidate the perhaps unintended consequences of this intent language, feedback from impacted municipalities demonstrates that the bed-count metric does not align with the operational, legal, and public-safety realities of community jail services. The themes summarized below reflect cross-community concerns, statutory obligations, unintended consequences, and suggested pathways to a sustainable and effective system. AML remains a committed partner to work toward intergovernmental solutions that preserve a cohesive system of public safety that Alaskans can count on without local governments bearing the costs of the State’s responsibilities.

I. Core Structural Problem: Bed Count Is Not a Valid Funding Metric

1. Jails are not scalable based on inmate volume

Community jails must operate at full readiness whether they house 1 inmate or 10. Fixed costs — staffing, supervision, utilities, training, compliance, facility upkeep — do not fluctuate with occupancy. Local corrections officers note that supervision standards under PREA and constitutional case law require *continuous, direct supervision*, independent of bed count. Communities emphasize that a jail is either open and staffed or closed — there is no lawful “reduced service” model.

2. Bed-count funding ignores statutory duties

When the State authorizes a community jail to detain individuals on State charges, it assumes legal responsibility to ensure those individuals are held in a facility that meets minimum safety and staffing requirements. Reducing funding on the premise of unused beds disregards these statutory and constitutional requirements. It is worth noting that the consequences of these decisions will likely not fall on DOC, but on the Department of Public Safety.

3. Bed usage is artificially reduced by State policy itself

Communities note that DOC’s expansion of electronic monitoring (EM) decreases local bed-day counts — but the State lacks capacity to enforce EM conditions, which local agencies currently handle on their behalf. Without enforcement, EM is ineffective, and bed counts become a circular and misleading metric.

Criticality – The Legislature’s formula fundamentally conflicts with how jails operate, how the law works, and how DOC relies on local partners.

II. Essential Public Safety Functions Provided by Community Jails

1. First-line, 24/7 public safety infrastructure

For many communities, their jail is the *only* public safety infrastructure in a vast region. In fact, individual municipal governments are often subsidizing use by other communities, where they serve as a drop-off point for detainees from elsewhere in the region. Their responsibilities include:

- Intake and emergency holding
- Coordination with troopers
- Title 47 mental health and alcohol holds
- Crisis management, often in severe weather or without aviation support

2. Prevention of dangerous in-field releases

Without local jails, officers may be forced to release violent or impaired individuals because no lawful facility is available. Consequences listed include increased use of force, community risk, and disruption to judicial proceedings.

3. Support for court operations and due process

Local jails enable timely access to counsel, local arraignments, regular court calendars, community-based support for defendants. Without them, transportation delays impede prosecutions and constitutional guarantees.

Criticality - Eliminating or weakening community jails directly erodes public safety and undermines the justice system. The State and Legislature should think holistically about not just the correctional facilities provided by local governments, but the public safety system as a whole.

III. Impact on Alaska State Troopers and State Costs

1. Transportation becomes unsustainable

Removing jail capacity forces every arrest into immediate transport — often by plane — to State facilities elsewhere in the system and often expensive and distant to get to. The majority of community jails lack road connections and already face long delays for AST transport. Current wait times of 1–2 weeks for Trooper transport are already unacceptable; without local jails, immediate, high-frequency transport would be required.

2. Trooper staffing needs would increase dramatically

Communities warn that AST would need many more officers trained and available for aviation transport.

3. State costs increase, not decrease

- More flights
- More overtime
- Centralized housing costs
- Reduced field presence for Troopers
- Potential need for the State to operate local facilities itself at much higher cost

Criticality - The Legislature's proposal could result in *higher* State costs and *lower* service levels. It could increase funding for DPS and on a case-by-case basis determine potential savings even with the increased transportation costs. This would come with corresponding impact on community public safety.

IV. Local Subsidization and Unsustainable Cost Shifts

1. Municipalities already subsidize State responsibilities

Local governments are already contributing local funds to operate these jails that are part of the State's correctional system. AML has documented for years this chronic underfunding by the State, which is picked up by local taxpayers.

2. Further funding cuts cross the threshold of operational viability

Communities indicate that another reduction, following recent FY26 cuts, would cause them to consider:

- Closing the facility entirely
- Reducing hours or staffing in ways that would violate law and case standards
- Withdrawing from the program and returning responsibility to the State

Criticality - The current funding structure is at a breaking point.

V. Staffing, Safety, and Legal Compliance Requirements

1. Minimum staffing requirements are non-negotiable

Multiple communities state the essential — and legally required — nature of maintaining continuous staffing. One community noted that a 24/7 facility needs at least 5 FTEs. Corrections officials emphasized the dangers of single-officer operations, mandatory overtime, and ratios necessary for prisoner safety.

2. Case law requires physical presence

Case law prohibits having prisoners in a facility without a corrections officer physically on site.

3. Scope of duties is far broader than supervision

It is worth pointing out the comprehensive list of jailer responsibilities, including:

- Meal preparation
- Medical transport, as well as facilitation of medical screening.
- Fingerprinting
- Laundry, cleaning, stocking
- Court transport
- EM tasks
- Visitation management

Criticality – The State’s funding formulas do not account for the statutory duties local jails must fulfill.

VI. Consequences of Not Funding Community Jails (Cross-Community Summary)

Communities consistently listed the following impacts:

- Increased risk to public safety and higher uses of force
- Loss of timely legal access and due process
- Heightened strain on families and community-based supports
- Delays in prosecutions, disrupted court calendars
- Increased State transportation and housing costs
- Reduced Trooper availability for patrols
- Risk of jail closures and State-assumed operational responsibility at higher cost

VI. Conclusion

The Legislature’s intent language does not align with the operational realities of community jails and will likely produce the opposite of its stated purpose. A bed-count-based reduction model:

- Undermines public safety,
- Transfers higher costs back to the State,
- Disrupts the justice system,
- Forces communities to subsidize State responsibilities, and
- Risks jail closures that the State cannot cost-effectively absorb.

A reformed, sustainable funding structure must recognize the fixed operational nature of community jails, their statutory roles, and the critical regional services they provide across rural Alaska.