Slow inmate processing at Denver jails leaves inmates, sheriff's deputies vulnerable, city auditor finds

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Violence within the Denver jail system could be curtailed if inmates spend less time in temporary holding areas and sheriff's deputies had more detailed information about the jail population, a recent review found.

The review — ordered by Denver City Auditor Timothy O'Brien and conducted by private consulting firm BDO LLP, Enterprise Risk Services — found the Denver Sheriff's Department's practices for processing new inmates needs improvement. Most notably, newcomers to the Denver jail system often wait in open holding areas for long periods of time, with "little physical protection."

"There would be fewer incidents and less need to use force if inmates were more efficiently moved out of general population areas and into housing assignments," O'Brien said in a statement.

BDO reviewed the sheriff's department's implementation of recommendations issued in a separate 2015 review by consulting firm Hilborn & Heinze. That 2015 review found deep excessive force and mismanagement problems and the consultant issued 277 recommendations.

BDO specifically examined how well the department has done since then, and found the recommendations complete, eight nearly complete, three partially complete and three not complete. In its review, BDO determined the Denver jail system process of intake isn't efficient and leaves both inmates and sheriff's deputies vulnerable.

"According to the assessment, before the inmate decides where an inmate should be housed, officers are separated in men and women and left in general holding areas known as 'the pit' on the first floor of the Van Cise-Shelton Detention Center on West Colfax Avenue in Denver," the auditor's office said in a statement. "In these areas, there is little physical protection for the officers or staff if an inmate's behavior is erratic."

Use-of-force incidents during processing have remained rather consistent for the sheriff's department, with an average of 250 incidents annually from 2014 to 2016. The auditor's office said, however, that could be reduced if inmates were processed faster.

BDO also noted, during intake, sheriff's deputies use information like inmate interviews, recommendations calculated by a computer algorithm and professional judgment to assign a security level and proper housing assignment for newcomers.

But deputies do not receive formal training, but rather professional judgement to generate through on-the-job experience. The department could benefit from a standardized training program, BDO said. One specific recommendation calls for training on in-depth interviews on topics such as mental health treatment, gang affiliation and prior arrests. Since the 2015 consultant review, the department has added a gang affiliation questionnaire to the interview process to ensure gang members aren't housed together.

BDO also noted that historical information on the jail's management system is often underutilized and the system "overwrites old information with new information, making the tracking and analysis of historical records inefficient or impossible," the auditor's office said.

"Strong training and analytics can help the jail identify trends and patterns," O'Brien said in a statement. "Through this kind of analytics, the jail could work to improve their overall performance and safety."

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Adam McCoy covers Denver area politics for Colorado Politics.