State eyeing Caddo facility to house chronically ill inmates

By JAMES MINTON
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Corrections Secretary Richard Stalder said his department plans to convert the Caddo Detention Center to a state-run facility for about 400 chronically ill inmates after that parish completes a new, larger jail late next year or in early 1994.

"Caddo Parish, in essence, is willing to give us the facility" in return for the jobs the state would create, Stalder said.

In the meantime, corrections officials are moving approximately 30 Louisiana State Penitentiary inmates with special medical needs to a nearby prison as part of the long-range plan to open the hospital-prison in Caddo Parish.

"The final details haven't been worked out yet, but that's the gist of it," a spokesman for Caddo Parish Commission Administrator Francis Bickham said.

If U.S. District Judge Frank Polozola approves a pending request, the state's maximum-security prison at Angola will close a hospital ward early next year after the 30 patients are transferred to Dixon Correctional Institute in Jackson, Stalder said.

Polozola has jurisdiction over Louisiana prisons and jails as part of a consent decree with the state in a 1971 lawsuit over prison conditions.

The medical profile of the inmates assigned to Ward 3 of Angola's New General Hospital varies, but most "are somewhat incapacitated," said Deputy Warden Richard Peabody.

"They require more than your normal (prison) medical services," DCI Deputy Warden Kelly Ward added. "They may have multiple medical conditions and need regular monitoring and a limited work status."

Ward said DCI received seven Angola patients last week and six more on Monday. The remainder will be transferred after Jan. 1, he said.

A Dec. 9 memorandum from Stalder to the Angola, DCI and Hunt Correctional Center wardens authorizes DCI to hire additional nurses, if needed, to beef up the Jackson prison's medical staff.

As DCI gains more chronically ill inmates, the prison may transfer other medically-stable prisoners to four other prisons, according to the memorandum.

Stalder said DCI was chosen to accept the Angola prisoners because of its proximity to Earl K. Long Medical Center.

The department also is equally dividing 12 kidney dialysis patients among Angola, DCI and Hunt for the most efficient use of EKL's four dialysis machines, the memo said.

Stalder said he wanted to show in his memorandum "we can do something in terms of weeks and months instead of years. It's intended to show we're capable of taking action in self-governing our prisons."

Meanwhile, Keith Nordyke, the court-appointed attorney for Louisiana inmates, said the Angola transfers "may be a step in the overall right direction," but added he is not certain Ward 3's closure will significantly affect the hospital staff's ability to better serve other prisoners.

"I don't think there's a direct correlation," Nordyke said.

The attorney agreed, however, that the hospital's medical records and pharmacy need additional space.

Stalder said the Caddo facility can take advantage of its proximity to Wade Correctional Center in Homer and the LSU Medical Center in Shreveport.

The prison could be operated from Wade without additional administrative staff, while the LSU hospital can offer occupational and physical therapy services many of the prisoners will require, he said.