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Our Overcrowded Jails

The problem of jail overcrowding cannot be solved by one stroke of magic. It will take a combination of answers if there is ever to be a time when inmates don't have to sleep on makeshift cots or the floor.

Palm Beach County has been under the gun for at least five years on this issue. In 1980, a lawsuit was filed by activist attorney James Green on behalf of county jail inmates. Overcrowding was the main impetus for the suit.

Even with the construction of a new jail on Gun Club Road, the problem remains. Green points out that the new jail was "overcrowded the day it opened." He attributes this to shortsightedness on the part of the county's planning staff.

Whether that is the case or not, the jail is now overcrowded. And the facilities which handle its overflow — the county stockade west of West Palm Beach and the jail in Belle Glade — are overcrowded as well.

Expanding jail facilities is not enough. First, there is the cost. Even if the public opts for less than maximum-security fortress-

es, as Green calls them, there is a limit to the number of correctional institutions that can be built. And just the construction of such facilities seems to encourage the incarceration of more inmates.

Green suggests that halfway houses and facilities to treat mentally incompetent criminals would help ease the problem of overcrowding. He also favors the establishment of a "master bond review" program.

This would give one judge the authority to review bonds set for suspects. When overcrowding threatened, the judge could "determine the best of the worst" and authorize the release of non-violent suspects.

The suggestion makes sense. Not only would it prevent overcrowding, but it would set up a logical and noncrisis mechanism to determine which prisoners should be released.

Palm Beach County has the dubious distinction now of incarcerating a higher percentage of suspects than either Dade or Broward counties. A master bond program might help change that and keep the jails for those who truly are a danger to society.