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Elderly inmates' health costs not issue in Lee

BY MICHELLE L. START
Florida Weekly Correspondent

At 82 years old, Joseph Rodriguez has the distinction of being Lee County's oldest inmate.

In any other jurisdiction, Rodriguez -- who is charged with second degree murder in the June 27 shooting death of his wife, Wanda -- being charged with the crime could translate into higher costs for local residents, but because Lee County has contracted with a privatized health care provider, his age is irrelevant.

While other places are struggling with increased healthcare costs associated with housing older and sicker inmates, Lee County has managed to delay the issue by signing a contract with Prison Health Services during the late 1990s.

"It is not an issue because we outsource," said Lee County Sheriff's Office Capt. Tom Eberhardt. "We pay a yearly price that is based on the number of inmates."

Studies show that about 500,000 people over the age of 50 are imprisoned nationally each year for violent and sexual offenses. And the numbers are increasing. A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Justice found that the number of inmates over the age of 55 increased by 33 percent from 2000 to 2005.

In a county where nearly a quarter of the residents are over the age of 65, the long-term costs and ramifications could be significant if more seniors continue to be arrested. Nationwide statistics show that about 1 percent of an area's population over

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the age of 50 is incarcerated. Based on that statistic, more than 1,300 people could be imprisoned in Lee.

However, Eberhardt said there are currently about 10 people over the age of 65 in Lee County Jails.

The jail typically holds 2,300 to 2,400 prisoners a day.

During the late 1990s, LCSO signed a \$5.1 million contract with Prison Health Services. That contract is based on an inmate population of 1,800, which amounts to about \$2,833 a year or \$7.76 a day per inmate

When the prison goes over 1,890 for a three-month period of time, additional charges of 96 cents per inmate per day accrue.

Based on the average census, Lee County is paying somewhere between \$14,448 and \$14,544 a day for inmate health care. Although some were eligible for Medicare or Medicaid prior to incarceration, those imprisoned no longer qualify for the federally funded program.

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