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FEATURED

Construction begins on new Davis jail medical wing; 'Lives will be saved,' sheriff says

By MARK SHENEFELT Standard-Examiner

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Dignitaries turn dirt at the groundbreaking for the new Davis County Jail Medical Observation Unit on Friday, Feb. 5, 2021.

MARK SHENEFELT, Standard-Examiner

FARMINGTON — Construction began Friday on a medical observation unit at the Davis County Jail, a project intended to keep pace with a societal tide of drug addiction and mental illness that increasingly imperils the lives of inmates.

“Lives will be saved in this facility, by nurses, by staff members,” Sheriff Kelly Sparks told a few dozen people who attended a groundbreaking ceremony during a snow flurry. “With this facility, we will all have a part of that. We live in a community where people take care of our own.”

For years, the jail has been saddled with a six-cell medical unit that officials say has been starkly inadequate to cover the demand.

In one high-profile case, inmate Heather Miller in 2016 fell from her bunk and was moved to another cell, not the medical unit, because the unit was full.

Miller bled to death internally and Davis County still is defending against a federal civil rights suit over her death.

County Commission Randy Elliott referred Friday to the reality of high community levels of opioid addiction and mental illness that have swamped local jails.

It is gratifying, he said, that the county was able to put together the new medical observation unit project so quickly, especially during a pandemic.

Commissioners in late 2019 approved a \$9 million bond to pay for the unit’s construction and followed that up in August last year with an \$8.2 million construction contract with Centerville-based Hogan & Associates.

Under a \$486,500 contract, Archiplex Group designed the structure.

The planned two-floor, 22,000-square-foot wing is being built between the jail and the work release center on the south side of the Davis County Justice Center property, 800 W. State St.

It will include 21 individual cells and two group cells, plus two padded safety cells, a nursing station and staff work area, offices and two telehealth rooms.

Officials hope the new wing will be open by late this year.

Deaths in Utah’s county jails have been a problem, especially in the last 10 years.

The Davis jail had six deaths in 2016 and one in 2017, then none until last year, when there were three suicides.

Sparks and his staff have beefed up medical and mental health intake screenings of new inmates. Meanwhile, a program with Davis Behavioral Health allows police officers to take nonviolent arrestees to a receiving center in the jail work release center. There, inmates who agree to enter drug or mental health therapy are not booked into jail.

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Mark Shenefelt