



Maricopa County Sheriff's Office
Paul Penzone, Sheriff

NEWSRelease

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SHERIFF PAUL PENZONE ORDERS TENT CITY CLOSED

TENTS DECOMMISSIONING TO BE COMPLETED WITHIN SIX MONTHS

Maricopa County Sheriff Paul Penzone has ordered Tent City closed, the decision coming following a comprehensive analysis by MCSO Staff and Sheriff Penzone's Executive Advisory Review (SPEAR).

In making the announcement Tuesday, Sheriff Penzone said, "The image of the Tents as a deterrent to recidivism, and as a symbol of being tough on crime may have been true in the past. Today it is only a myth. Tent City is no longer an effective, efficient facility. It has been effective only as a distraction. The circus is over; the Tents are coming down. We are going to give the criminals what they don't want and the taxpayers what they do."

Sheriff Penzone made the choice to close the facility after an exhaustive process of analysis, interviews with MCSO Detention Leadership, a review by a nationally recognized jail expert, feedback from inmates, and multiple site tours.

"This decision is my responsibility and my choice. I made the call," said the Sheriff. "Before doing so, I promised an intense review of the data and to listen to a variety of diverse opinions. It took time to complete that process."

Opened in 1993, Tent City was designed to house up to 2100 inmates. Tent City was built as jail populations spiked in Maricopa County and around the nation due to harsh sentencing guidelines. At its peak, the population was approximately 1700. Since 2006, that number has been in a steady and continuing decline to the present average of 700 to 800 detainees. Despite the significant drop in population, the cost of operations remained the same, averaging \$8.7 million annually. The Tents house low-level offenders who were sentenced to serve up to one year in jail.

"Our internal data and SPEAR's study showed Tents to be a facility that was expensive to operate and was a drain on our detention officer staffing. There is no empirical evidence to indicate that Tents inmates are less likely to re-offend," explained Sheriff Penzone. "The image

of hard core inmates being punished and ‘scared straight’ through forced exposure to our hot summers was false. All inmates could opt to stay in air conditioned areas and their medical condition and fitness for Tents detention was constantly monitored.”

Surveys of Tent City inmates conducted by MCSO showed a preference for Tents over hardened jail cells, primarily because it offered freedom of movement in the open air. The major inmate complaints were in protest of required vegetarian meals.

SPEAR was given the Tent City assignment in early January. The 13-member committee is a diverse cross-section of Maricopa County civic and business leaders and is chaired by former Arizona Attorney General Grant Woods. Following four meetings, review of multiple data sets, and on site tours, it recommended closure.

“Tent City was established to fill the demand for quick and inexpensive beds,” explained SPEAR Chairperson Woods. “Attitudes towards incarceration for many crimes have changed since 1993. By closing Tent City, needed money can be reallocated by moving inmates to other MCSO jails.”

The process of decommissioning the facility will begin immediately and is expected to be completed within six (6) months. Inmates will be reassigned to Estrella and Durango jails. Work furlough and work release inmates numbering about 200 will continue to be housed in one section of Tent City until a new method of managing them can be finalized. The physical tent structures will be placed in storage, donated, or sent to a landfill, depending on their condition and how they were acquired. The closure will allow about \$4.5 million of taxpayer dollars to be more effectively allocated within MCSO’s detention services.

Sheriff Penzone has also asked MCSO Detention Leadership to conduct an analysis of jail space and rehabilitation programs with a goal of modernizing and being economical in the agency’s approach to detention. Maricopa County breaks ground on a new, multi-million dollar, 500+ bed Inmate Transfer and Release (ITR) facility at Durango in May. The County’s Smart Justice task force continues to explore options to alter sentencing and rehabilitation guidelines to raise success rates while cutting the costs of incarceration.

“Closing Tent City doesn’t mean you aren’t going to jail in Maricopa County. We have five hard-walled detention centers waiting for you and your stay will not be a pleasant experience,” said Sheriff Penzone. “Jail isn’t supposed to be fun, but we can use it more effectively to help those who make mistakes break the cycle of criminal behavior.”