



## John Howard Association of Illinois

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### **Monitoring Tour of Lincoln Correctional Center March 3, 2010**

*Summary: A well run prison, but running out of room.*

On March 3 representatives of the John Howard Association conducted a monitoring tour of Lincoln Correctional Center. They visited a general population unit, segregation unit, educational/vocational facilities, mental health unit, medical clinic and commissary. Lincoln is a medium-security prison with a capacity to house 998 women.

Warden Melody Hulett has a policy of offering educational, vocational and rehabilitative classes and programs to as many Lincoln inmates as possible. This laudable policy is complicated by the fact that the prison is uncomfortably close to full. (See Crowding section below.)

Approximately 65 percent of Lincoln's inmate population is involved in educational, vocational or rehabilitative programs. Prison management said the number would approach 100 percent if enough staff and other resources were available.

Last year 50 inmates earned their GED, a pass rate of 93 percent. Prison staff said the remarkably high pass rate was partly due to pre-GED testing. Those who score well on the preliminary testing are deemed highly likely to succeed and are given priority in taking the actual GED test.

Currently 75 inmates are enrolled in GED classes and another 42 are on a waiting list.

(Note that numbers cited in this report fluctuate frequently.)

Lincoln has an arrangement with Richland Community College to provide a business management class to teach managerial and customer skills, a commercial custodial service to teach cleaning and maintenance techniques, and computer technology. The latter program readies student-inmates to work in the fields of data entry, data processing and customer service.

Classes typically have a ratio of 15 to 17 students per teacher. Despite waiting lists, about 75 vocational certificates are issued annually.

Lincoln also offers a professional level program to teach inmates nail technology. The course includes 350 hours of training and can last as long as five months, roughly the same length of training offered at commercial nail technology schools. In the last nine years 110 inmates have taken the state licensing test. Only one failed.

Staff would like to see a class in construction skills revived. It was last offered two years ago.

A partial list of other programs include Adult Basic Education, special education for inmates under 21, anger management and vocational preparation.

Lincoln's substance abuse program serves 128 women. Several inmates said the program is an important part of their lives.

"If I go back out there and start using again, I am going to die," said one inmate who was previously addicted to crack cocaine. She said this is the third time she has gone through a substance abuse program.

"I am confident it is going to work this time," she said.

Inmates typically are eager to go to work, even for jobs paying as little as \$15 a month. Wages can go slightly higher for skilled workers.

Twenty Lincoln inmates sew garments for use by inmates at other prisons. Their sewing skills can be of use when seeking employment after release. There are 84 inmates on a waiting list for a job in the sewing shop.

A warehouse at Lincoln is currently under renovation to house two new industries. A sign shop will produce signs for the Illinois Department of Transportation, Lincoln staff said. Inmates will also find work in "wiping" the memory of discarded state computers, a privacy and security measure.

The new industries will yield 40 additional jobs. No date has been set for the work to begin.

Some prisons have a policy of excluding inmates with long sentences from enrolling in classes or participating in rehabilitative programs. That is not the case at Lincoln, where inmates facing many years in custody can still participate in nearly all programs. This inclusive policy is intended to develop inmates serving long sentences into mentors. Those mentors can beneficially influence other soon to be released inmates.

“Those are the people who are going to have the greatest impact on the population,” said Debbie Denning, IDOC Women and Family Services Coordinator. “It makes them better prisoners.”

Warden Hulett and other IDOC personnel have clearly assigned high priority to education, vocational training and other inmate self-improvement programs.

This is commendable and the John Howard Association would like to see Lincoln’s programs and policies implemented throughout the Illinois prison system.

### **Crowding**

Lincoln’s management and staff must contend with a factor beyond their control. The prison is nearly full and likely to reach maximum capacity in the near future.

On the day of the tour Lincoln’s inmate population totaled 979, just 19 below the prison’s maximum capacity. This means Lincoln has almost no flexibility in housing more women. (Inmate population did fall slightly in the days after the tour.)

“We are at an all time high,” said Denning.

Lincoln is packed in part because the state has canceled an early release policy. Simultaneously, parole officers are cracking down on parole violators, returning an increased number of people to prison.

This has led to crowding at nearly all state prisons. Senior staff of the Illinois Department of Corrections predicted recently that its prisons will begin to exceed capacity by this summer. They are studying ways to house inmates in prison gyms and other spaces if that becomes necessary.

Nearly all Lincoln inmates are housed in small dormitories containing 10 bunk beds. With 20 inmates and the visual obstruction caused by the bunk beds, it is difficult to observe some parts of the dormitory. The dormitories are cramped now and cannot accommodate additional women.

Women inmates, as a group, are less violent than male inmates, less likely to have strong gang affiliations and less likely to manufacture weapons. Prison staff said, however, that double-bunking 20 women together in a confined space inevitably generates dispute and conflict.

Specialty units are also filled nearly to capacity. The medical unit has a capacity of six and recently four inmates were housed there. The disciplinary segregation unit has a capacity of 11 and recently nine inmates were housed there. Segregation units at Lincoln

house two inmates per cell, an undesirable practice for individuals who by definition are disruptive.

Such specialty units should have one or more cells held vacant in reserve to house inmates on very short notice.

Lincoln prison management presumes they will not be sent more inmates than they can properly house. Hopefully that will be the case.

Nevertheless, it is undesirable for a prison to reach maximum capacity. It can require staff to work excessive overtime. It can raise the level of tension in institutions that can least afford it. It impedes educational, vocational and rehabilitative programs needed by inmates.

Resumption of an early release program would certainly alleviate those problems.

## **Medical Care**

Two problems with medical care for inmates were noted during the tour.

Inmates reported they go years between routine oral hygiene treatment and teeth cleaning. Medical staff confirmed there are delays in providing basic dental hygiene.

This is because no dental hygienist is assigned to Lincoln. Medical personnel said no oral hygienist has been assigned to Lincoln for at least 25 years.

The prison does have a full-time dentist who carries out oral hygiene tasks when not busy with more pressing dental problems.

The dentist, Aubrey Millet, acknowledged that he can perform routine hygiene only two or three times a week. This is not enough to meet demand and inmates can go as long as three years between cleanings. Dentists typically recommend a dental hygiene treatment every six months.

Millet said the problem of hygiene and care is compounded by the fact that people often arrive in prison with pre-existing dental problems, some serious.

Deferred oral hygiene is a false economy. It leads to more serious and expensive dental problems in the future.

It is also a waste of time and money for a highly trained dentist to perform such procedures when they could be carried out at less cost by a dental hygienist.

Lincoln should be assigned a dental hygienist.

Another issue with medical care involves the prison clinic. It is too small.

The clinic includes three cramped examination rooms. Medical personnel said there is inadequate room for records and written patient histories. Inmates seeking medical attention are jammed together in waiting areas. Hallways are used for storage (space remains sufficient for passage).

Medical personnel said the clinic's close quarters make it difficult to maintain patient-inmate privacy.

### **Commissary**

Lincoln's commissary is well-stocked with clothing, food and personal hygiene items.

Review of commissary prices showed them to be in line with ordinary retail prices or cheaper. A clear rain poncho is \$3.34 and an 8.8 ounce container of peanut brittle is \$1.74. Prison management is exploring the possibility of offering fresh fruit for sale.

However, a comparison of Lincoln's commissary list with that of Logan Correctional Center, a men's medium-security prison adjacent to Lincoln, show some differences.

For example, the female inmates at Lincoln have more than 180 food and beverage items to choose from. The male inmates at Lincoln have fewer than 60.

The inmates at Lincoln have four art supply items to choose from, if paper, pens, and pencils are considered art supplies. The inmates at Logan have 55 art supply items.

The Illinois Department of Corrections is reorganizing its commissary system with the intent of ending such inconsistencies and improving the quality of items sold.

### **Other Observations**

The average inmate is 35 years old and will stay at Lincoln for three years.

Participants in Lincoln's substance abuse program are increasingly likely to have attended college or come from a professional background.

A total of 336 inmates are receiving some type of mental health care and 88 are receiving psychotropic medication, none involuntarily.

Staff and inmates seemed to interact without friction. In February no inmate filed a written grievance. On average two or three grievances are filed each month.

The library has a collection of 10,000 books. For space reasons only a portion are available at any one time but the selection of books available changes regularly. The law library appeared to be adequate and includes updated supplements of law texts.

Lincoln's physical plant seems to be in generally good repair but staff says some road and walkways need resurfacing.

A portion of Lincoln's large grounds have been turned into gardens. The vegetables grown are served to inmates to supplement their soy-based state diet.