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Monitoring Tour of Pontiac Correctional Center February 16, 2010

Summary: No vocational and little educational opportunity for many inmates, but prison management is attempting to improve opportunities for other prisoners.

On Feb. 16 a group of six John Howard Association personnel and volunteers conducted a monitoring tour of Pontiac Correctional Center. Pontiac consists primarily of a maximum security unit which includes prisoners in disciplinary-related segregation or protective custody and Death Row. There is an adjoining medium security unit.

Pontiac's maximum security segregation inmates, most serving long or life-term sentences, include some of the most disruptive individuals in the custody of the Illinois Department of Corrections. Among them are inmates believed to present a serious threat to staff and other inmates. They typically come from other prisons where they committed serious offenses and are held for months or years in segregation at Pontiac.

Of the approximately 1,200 maximum security inmates, 580 are held in disciplinary-related segregation status. They receive virtually nothing in the way of education, vocational training or other rehabilitative programs. Most of the remaining maximum security inmates are in Protective Custody and they, like the approximately 490 medium security inmates, have some access to education and other programs but no vocational training.

The inmates segregated for disciplinary reasons are treated to a more restrictive regime than inmates in general population at other prisons. For example, they are not allowed to purchase food from the commissary and must subsist exclusively on the soy-based diet fed to state inmates. During the tour several inmates complained of being underfed and said they were losing weight.

Pontiac Warden Guy Pierce said the inmate's diets are approved in advance by a state nutritionist.

Segregated inmates' time out of cell is more limited than general population inmates and they may be allowed to shower only three times a week. Other than a small GED program which can accommodate about 30 inmates at a time, there are no educational programs for segregated inmates.

A consistent complaint among maximum security segregation inmates was the absence of educational and rehabilitative programs.

For example, Pontiac's segregated inmates include many with a history of violence. Despite this, there is no anger management program for them. Inmates are instead given a booklet which offers tips on anger management.

Prison management said lack of staff and money prevent them from offering programs to segregated inmates. Many of Pontiac's inmates are deeply problematic and access to programs would require extensive security staffing.

In any case such inmates are not among the highest priority for educational programs, prison management said.

"Why would we spend money on something they will never use because they will never get out," said one senior manager at Pontiac.

Although also held in maximum security, inmates in protective custody are offered GED Programming and Adult Basic Education as well as Substance Abuse Education, Anger Management Groups, Criminal Thinking Patterns, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, Warden Pierce said.

Prison management has plans to expand programs offered at the medium security unit at Pontiac. Medium security inmates are serving sentences of no more than 20 years.

A single teacher conducts GED and adult basic education and can teach about 60 medium security inmates at a time. There previously were two teachers. Currently there is a two-month waiting list for GED schooling and a six-month waiting list for adult basic education.

Warden Pierce said medium security inmates are offered programs such as Job Preparation, Substance Abuse Education, Anger Management, Criminal Thinking Patterns, Lifestyle Redirection, Parole School, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Inmates enrolled in Narcotics Anonymous said they found the program to be effective at rehabilitation.

The John Howard Association interviewed numerous medium security inmates. Nearly all said they would like vocational training to help them obtain a job upon release. They cited a desire for training in carpentry, auto mechanics, culinary arts and similar skills.

Pontiac senior staff said they would like to see such programs offered to medium security inmates. Staff said they hope to offer culinary arts training using the existing kitchen. There are also plans for a fatherhood program.

Senior staff also said there is a plan to make college classes available to medium security inmates, although there is no timetable for accomplishing this goal. No effort is underway to obtain college course work for maximum security inmates as such education for them is prohibited by state law.

The management of Pontiac Correctional Center clearly would like to make more programs available for all inmates but is constrained by budget and staffing limitations beyond their control. The disruptive behavior of some inmates further complicates management's efforts to improve conditions.

Nevertheless, the John Howard Association believes the absence of programs for maximum security inmates in disciplinary-related segregation is a false economy in that it gives individuals little opportunity to improve themselves. That they are denied access to Anger Management and other rehabilitative classes simply means they are less likely to change their behavior.

Mental Health

As might be expected, Pontiac inmates require more mental health services than that of an ordinary prison population. Despite that need, Pontiac has for a year and a half had an unfilled position for a clinical psychologist.

Dr. John Garlick oversees care for the approximately 50 inmates currently housed in Pontiac's mental health unit, which has 98 cells. Garlick said he expects the unit will be fully occupied once he has the assistance of the clinical psychologist, an indication there is an unmet need for more mental health care.

A similar situation was observed in January at the Dwight Correctional Center, where the mental health unit was in need of an additional part-time psychiatrist. The Illinois Department of Corrections has since moved to resolve that problem.

While it can be difficult to attract qualified mental health professionals to work in a prison setting, an 18-month delay in hiring is excessive. Garlick said the clinical psychologist position has been posted for recruitment and is hopeful it soon will be filled.

Psychotropic medication is widely used at Pontiac. Between 300 and 500 inmates are prescribed psychotropics at any given time. The mentally ill who complete their term of segregation at Pontiac are typically transferred to Dixon Correctional Center. Dixon is equipped to care for inmates with psychiatric problems.

Garlick said he has observed a gradual change in the inmates sent to Pontiac.

"The population is getting more and more mentally ill," he said. Garlick attributed this to the near abolition of civilian institutions that once cared for the mentally ill. Increasingly, he said, that burden is falling on prisons.

Infrastructure

The maximum security cellblocks at Pontiac are utterly obsolete.

Some of the prison's buildings date to 1871. Most inmates are housed in long, linear galleries with multiple tiers of cells. Such design makes supervision of inmates more difficult than current prison architecture, which calls for smaller units of inmates who can be observed from a central position. The medium security housing units at Pontiac, built in the mid-1970s, are of the more contemporary X house design.

Warden Pierce said he believes supervision of inmates is not a problem.

In winter, Pontiac's maximum security cellblocks derive their warmth from a central heating plant. This and the archaic design of the prison lead to wide variations in temperature which are difficult or impossible to control. One cellblock might be cool but tolerable at floor level, for example, but too hot on a top tier near the ceiling.

Warden Pierce said temperatures are monitored daily and "remain at an average norm."

Buildings in the maximum security prison are spread out over a wide area. Transporting inmates between them can be time consuming for staff. Contemporary prisons minimize the distance inmates are expected to travel to reduce the burden on staff.

Although visibly worn, the maximum security unit was clean and orderly at the time of the tour. The medium security unit was equally clean and orderly.

Tamms Inmates

Last year Michael Randle, director of the Illinois Department of Corrections, announced that the department would move some inmates out of the Tamms Closed Maximum Security Unit. The supermax prison has often been criticized for harsh conditions. Officials at IDOC are working to move appropriate inmates to less restrictive prisons elsewhere in the state.

Pontiac currently houses 10 such inmates and prison management expect to house more in the near future. The goal is for inmates to readjust to living in prison with other

inmates, unlike the near total isolation they endure at Tamms, and eventually join the general population of prison.

Several former Tamms inmates complained that they received more yard time and showers at Tamms than they do at Pontiac.

Pontiac's management said the former Tamms inmates have posed no special problems and required no special medical or psychiatric treatment. No former Tamms inmates have been involuntarily returned to that prison from Pontiac. Some of the inmates were incarcerated at Tamms since its opening more than a decade ago.

Other Conditions

Inmates condemned to death complain that lights are on 24 hours a day and that they have no communal activities. Inmates throughout Pontiac complained they spend too little time out of their cells.

Despite the restrictive regime for segregation inmates, several said they were treated reasonably well by staff. Inmates and staff appeared to interact without friction.

Senior prison managers showed special concern for one inmate with psychiatric problems who they described as particularly dangerous. Several segregation inmates said they felt they would benefit from group therapy, but such programs are not available to them.

According to prison staff, approximately 850 inmates are regarded as being a moderate to extremely high risk of attempting escape. Approximately 15 percent of the inmate population is serving a life term.