

DEFINITELY NOT A FIVE STAR HOTEL

A Report on the Mendocino County Jail, Courthouse Holding Cells, and Evidence Room

May 19, 2011

Summary

The 2010-2011 Mendocino Grand Jury (GJ) conducted the mandated annual visit to the Mendocino County Jail (MCJ) on October 7, 2010.

The MCJ staffing is frozen at the present time, with no anticipation of filling eight vacant Correctional Deputy positions in the near future.

The County is challenged in its efforts to maintain the physical condition of the aging buildings; however, management is able to provide basic, mandated services to the inmates with the reduced budget.

Several agencies, groups, and individuals in the community provide services to inmates, which can continue upon their release. Some of the services available are: Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, Life Skills, Anger Management, church services by request, and education provided by Mendocino County Adult School.

Methods

The GJ inspected the MCJ, including holding cells, the main cells in Buildings #1 and #2, booking area, sally port, kitchen, laundry, garden area, and the programs building. The GJ interviewed staff, reviewed documents including the inmate program schedule, inmate health census, California Correction Standards Authority Bi-Annual Report, annual inspection report, organizational chart, inmate complaint forms, and budget.

The GJ visited the courthouse holding cells on April 7, 2011 and the Mendocino County Main Storage Evidence Room on April 28, 2011.

Background

Penal Code §919(b) states, "...the Grand Jury shall inquire into the conditions and management of the public prisons within the county." The MCJ falls within this mandate.

Findings - Jail

1. At the time of the GJ visit, the staff consisted of: one Captain-Jail Commander, one Corrections Lieutenant, six Sergeants (eight allocated), and 38 Corrections Deputies with eight vacant and frozen Corrections Deputy positions. Some Corrections Deputies are bi-lingual.

2. There are eight support staff employees, who work as administrative assistants, booking technicians, kitchen help, and laundry help.
3. Corrections Deputies work four 12-hour shifts, resulting in eight hours of overtime pay per week.
4. One Sergeant and four Corrections Deputies are responsible for transportation of prisoners to and from the courthouse, other jurisdictions, jails, and prisons.
5. The maximum capacity of the jail is 302 inmates. On October 7, 2010, the inmate population was 257: males 223 and females 34. Overcrowding occurs due to the required classification of inmates.
6. The jail is divided into several classification areas: male, female, sentenced, non-sentenced, violent, protected custody, and those with gang association. Inmate classifications are denoted by color of coveralls.
7. Video security cameras monitor all doors and common areas.
8. The jail consists of five buildings and an administration area:
 - Building #1 contains a secured entry for prisoner intake, the booking and holding area, safety and sobering cells, attorney-prisoner conference room, inmate cells, and a prisoner-visitor area,
 - Building #1, due to its design, has the capability to visually observe the common area,
 - Building #2 is designed with an overlook command center that allows staff to observe the three wings,
 - Administration building,
 - Kitchen and laundry building,
 - Inmate services building.
9. Buildings #1 and #2 have plumbing problems that require constant repair due to old plumbing and inmate abuse of plumbing equipment.
10. Corrections Standards Authority (CSA) Bi-Annual Inspection Report of May 5, 2010, showed the following non-compliance issues in the facility:
 - clogged floor drains,
 - unbalanced water pressure in the hot and cold supply lines,
 - malfunctioning showers,
 - leaking water lines,
 - heating and air conditioning units did not provide a comfortable living environment.
11. A letter from the CSA, dated February 14, 2011, states that all non-compliance issues have been corrected.
12. General Services Agency provides one full time maintenance person to maintain the facility.
13. The kitchen facility was found to be clean and neat. Inmates assist with the preparation of meals; breakfast and lunch are served cold except for hot soup and dinner is a hot meal. The rotating menu meets the State recommended nutritional guidelines.
14. Female inmates work in the laundry and garden; presently, two low-risk female inmates work as volunteers at the County Animal Shelter.

15. There are programs that allow the low-risk offender inmates to work in lieu of their jail term:
 - the Home Detention Program is available for low-risk offenders, allowing inmates to work while serving their sentence from home, wearing an ankle bracelet,
 - the Sheriff's Work Alternative Program (SWAP) is available for low-risk offenders to work for non-profit organizations, in lieu of jail time.
16. Schooling, including computer classes, is provided by Mendocino County Adult School; internet service is not available.
17. Inmates staying longer than the average of 15-16 days may work towards earning a General Education Diploma.
18. Other programs available are: Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Life Skills, and Anger Management. Church services and counseling are available by request. Non-legal incoming/outgoing mail and telephone calls are monitored.
19. Privileges for inmates include television, books and other reading materials, games, and an exercise area.
20. Regular visits by family and friends are supervised; an appointment is recommended.
21. Medical, mental health and dental services are provided. A physician and psychiatrist are both on site, eight hours per week. Nursing staff is on site 24 hours per day, and a dentist, one day a week. Program managers and doctors are always available by telephone.
22. Every inmate receives a health questionnaire when booked, and receives a health screening, including a tuberculosis test 15 days after admission.
23. In 2010, the average ending of the month population was 255.
24. In 2010, there were 126,772 doses of prescribed medicine administered to 1,128 inmates.
25. In 2010, among the confirmed communicable diseases, 20 cases of MERSA (methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus), and one case of meningitis were reported.
26. The MCJ staff follows the rules regarding contagious diseases. Personnel sanitize areas with a bleach solution where MERSA inmates are housed. Contagious inmates are accommodated, as per their needs.
27. Each complaint written by inmates is investigated and documented.
28. Two recent cost savings have been implemented:
 - establishing their own bakery, providing high quality bread and other baked goods for the jail and the juvenile hall; the bakery provides job training for the inmates,
 - replacing paper bowls with reusable, unbreakable rubberized bowls equal to the cost of one year's paper bowl expense.
29. Continuous budget reductions are affecting necessary facility repairs, adequate staffing, and services.

30. Recently, the California Governor signed a law which will keep low-risk offenders in county jails, rather than sending them to State prison. The law will be implemented when the State has funds to cover the county's expense.

Findings – Courthouse Holding Cells

31. Public safety is the highest priority when inmates are in a public environment.
32. The courthouse has no sally port for the secure transfer of prisoners.
33. Prisoners are checked for contraband when entering or exiting the jail.
34. There are four full time Correctional Deputies available for transport.
35. Prisoners are transported between the MCJ, the courthouse, prisons, and other jurisdictions. At times, overtime pay is required for transportation of prisoners.
36. Prisoner classifications make transport difficult; gang members, medical, protective custody, violent, and non-violent prisoners cannot be transported or held together.
37. Three of the four holding cells hold 10 inmates each. One cell holds six, has a privacy screen and is designated for female inmates.
38. Observation of inmates is maintained at all times. A deputy is required to remain in the holding cell area and must check each prisoner twice during a 30 minute period.
39. Inmates are held an average of 30 minutes before being moved to a courtroom. The elevator used to access the courtroom is also the public elevator. Public access to the elevator is prohibited during prisoner use.
40. There is an attorney-inmate interview room.
41. The fire extinguisher was observed to have a current certification tag, and is to be recertified in April 2011.
42. Two emergency exit doors are controlled by jail personnel.
43. Storage closets, gun lockers, and a telephone are located outside the holding cell area. Guns are not permitted inside the holding cell area.
44. The water damaged ceiling in the northeast corner of the main hall, cited in last year's GJ report, remains unrepaired, and additional water damage can now be seen at the east end of the hall.
45. Mendocino County General Services Agency is not responsible for maintenance and repair of the Courthouse building. The Courthouse provides for its own repairs through a private contractor.

Findings – Main Evidence Room

46. The principal responsibility of the property manager is to provide security and integrity of the people's evidence.
47. The evidence room serves and assists all local law enforcement agencies, including the CHP, CAL FIRE, and Department of Fish and Game.
48. The evidence room staff remains at one full-time and one half-time Evidence Technician. Overtime is not permitted.
49. Although previously recommended by GJs, there is still no intern or volunteer help at this time.
50. Fingerprints continue to be kept manually and digitally.

51. The bar-code evidence retention system, that clearly shows the intake and outtake of items, was purchased, but not implemented.
52. Storing, maintaining, and disposing of evidence is dictated by the standard of operations, and requires precise, time consuming work.
53. The evidence room remains over-crowded due to lack of systematic purging of evidence.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. the Mendocino County Sheriff establish a dedicated grant writing position to obtain necessary operational funds for the jail, (Findings 1, 23)
2. the General Services Agency Director assign an additional, in-house, maintenance person to maintain and repair building problems, (Findings 9-10, 12)
3. the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors designate additional budget monies to be targeted for maintenance of the jail facility, (Finding 12)
4. the Mendocino County Sheriff investigate the use of *Federal* asset forfeiture funds for the repair of the jail facilities, (Findings 9, 44-45)
5. the Mendocino County Sheriff investigate using asset forfeiture funds for staff overtime for the evidence room, (Findings 48, 53)
6. the Mendocino County Sheriff recruit volunteers or interns to help in the evidence room. (Findings 48-49, 52-53)

Discussion

On April 4, 2011, the California Governor, signed a law stating that felons convicted of non-violent crimes would serve their time in county jails instead of state prison. The law will be implemented when the State has funds to transfer to the counties to cover these additional costs. The GJ hopes that this will not be another unfunded mandate from the State.

Inmates write letters to the local newspaper editor complaining about the lack of quarantine and sanitation for MERSA cases, not receiving their medications, and cold meals. With the exception of cold food, the GJ determined that the allegations were unfounded. The budget has not provided funds for an additional cook for several years, therefore, breakfast and lunch, with the exception of soup, are served cold.

Management and staff are to be commended for their dedicated service to the Mendocino County Jail. Employees are conscientious and concerned with inmates' safety.

The investment in the jail bakery results in cost savings for the Jail and Juvenile Hall and provides vocational job training for inmates.

Required Responses

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (All Findings; All Recommendations)

Mendocino County Sheriff (All Findings; Recommendations 1, 4-6)

Mendocino County General Services Director (Findings 9-12; Recommendation 2)

Mendocino County Jail Commander (Findings 1-29)