

OPEN A SCHOOL DOOR, CLOSE A JAIL CELL

A REPORT ON MENDOCINO COUNTY JUVENILE HALL

MAY 12, 2010

Summary

The Grand Jury, (GJ), conducted its mandated annual visit to the Mendocino County Juvenile Hall, (MCJH), on Low Gap Road in Ukiah. This facility houses youth under the age of 18 who are wards of the court. Youth may be kept there until they turn age 19. The facility is managed and dedicated to providing a safe and secure environment. The administrators and staff have implemented several programs for educating and rehabilitating youth for re-entry into society.

The GJ is concerned about staffing levels and cost, a 60% recidivism rate, limited mental health services, and the excessive length of incarceration for one youth who was held in excess of three years.

Methods

The GJ visited the MCJH on October 28, 2009. The GJ inspected the cells, booking area, classrooms, recreation areas, dining room and kitchen facilities. Documents reviewed included the in-house 2008 Annual Report, Mendocino County Health and Human Service Agency inspection reports, the Department of Public Health Communicable Disease Control report, the California Fire Marshal inspection report, the Corrections Standard Authority report, food menus, and the MCJH budget. Supervisors, educators, line-staff, and youth were interviewed.

Background

California Penal Code §919(b) states, "...the Grand Jury shall inquire into the conditions and management of the public prisons within the county". MCJH falls within this mandate. MCJH provides for the physical and emotional care of incarcerated youth in Mendocino County pursuant to California Code of Regulations, Title 15 of the Education Code and Title 24 of the Health and Safety Code.

The facility is divided into three units: Unit A for females, Unit B for males and Unit C for older or violent wards and those charged with serious crimes.

Unit C is fully self-contained. It is a high security area that has its own classroom, showers, exercise room, and dining area with food brought in from the kitchen. Males and females in Units A and B attend school and eat at the same time, seated at separate tables in the dining room. All youth are given an orientation on acceptable behavior.

As mandated, all youth fill out a health questionnaire and receive a physical examination which includes a tuberculosis test within 96 hours of admission, per Title 15. By participating in the State's School Breakfast Program, the County receives approximately \$40,000 into the general fund. MCJH staff and Mendocino County Office of Education, (MCOE), provide social awareness programs:

- anger management
- conflict resolution
- parenting skills
- self-esteem
- drug/alcohol education
- behavioral awareness

Upon admission to MCJH youth are tested for grade level competency. Year-round school is mandatory. MCJH is an integral part of the Criminal Justice System and operates under the Probation Department.

All staff must clear a background check, demonstrate a strong work ethic and possess good communication skills. Fulltime Correction Counselors are required to complete 200 hours of core training within the first year of employment. Supervisors are required to have 40 hours of annual training. Correctional Counselors must complete 24 hours of annual training.

Title 15 requires minimal recreation allowance of three hours on school days and five hours on non-school days. Recreation can be either indoors or outdoors and is offered equally to both genders.

Findings

1. The 2009/2010 County budget provides funding for 30.8 positions which includes a three percent vacancy factor.
2. The staff consists of one Superintendent, five Supervising Correction Counselors, and 17 Correction Counselors, of which five positions are vacant; one licensed vocational nurse on site 32 hours per week, a mental health clinician, and four kitchen staff. Three Correction Counselors are bilingual.
3. Adequate staffing is mandated by the State at a ratio of one Correction Counselor per 10 juveniles for days and evening shifts and one Supervising Correction Counselor per 30 juveniles for the night shift. One female Correction Counselor must be on the premises at all times.
4. Savings created by short staffing may be offset by an increase in overtime pay to meet mandated staffing levels.
5. Five vacant fulltime Correction Counselor positions are being supplanted by four part-time extra help Correction Counselors.
6. The staff works eight hour shifts, five days per week. Two of the five supervisors work four 10-hour shifts. The schedule provides time for staff to continue their education.

7. MCOE provides three fulltime teachers, one special educational resource aide, and one paraprofessional. Four substitute teachers are available. The maximum capacity of MCJH is 42 youth, however the facility is considered full at 40. On October 28, 2009, there were 21 youth: 15 males and six females.
8. A physician or physician's assistant is available on call 24/7.
9. Seventy percent of youth have substance abuse issues. Sixty percent of the youth are repeat offenders. Approximately 30% of the youth have behavioral problems and require 75% of staff time.
10. Mendocino Youth Project staff provides mental health services on site, 20 hours a week.
11. Video observation and electronic security are maintained for doors and common areas throughout the facility at all times. At the time of the GJ visit, there was one camera that would not rotate properly and did not cover its intended yard area.
12. The average length of stay is 15 days. The maximum sentence at MCJH is one year. The stay can be longer for un-sentenced youth.
13. One un-sentenced youth was recently incarcerated for over three years.
14. Parents/guardians are billed on a sliding scale, up to \$18 per day, for the cost of incarcerating a youth in MCJH. The maximum bill for each stay is \$900. Reimbursement is problematic.
15. There is zero tolerance for anything gang related.
16. MCJH does not receive asset forfeiture funds.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. State mandated staffing ratios be implemented and maintained at all times by hiring part-time, on call, employees to reduce the necessity for overtime pay. (Findings 1-10)
2. MCJH provide fulltime mental health and substance-abuse counseling resources to incarcerated youth to prevent high recidivism rates. (Finding 10)
3. MCJH repair the surveillance camera. (Finding 11)
4. the District Attorney shall insure that timely disposition of each case will occur to guarantee that no youth is incarcerated for more than the statutory one-year maximum at MCJH. (Findings 13-14)
5. improve the system of billing and collecting from parents/guardians to offset the daily cost of incarcerating the youth in the facility. (Finding 15)
6. anti-gang educational programs funded through asset forfeiture funds be utilized at MCJH. (Findings 16-17)

Discussion

The GJ was pleased with the management of MCJH and found the facility to be clean and found the youth to be respectful and well groomed. The GJ found that staff successfully promotes structure for the youth including social skills, such as appropriate table manners. The GJ found that MCJH operated with as homelike an environment as possible. This includes providing food, clothing, and personal hygiene items, as well as medical, psychiatric, and dental services. Youth shower and have clean undergarments daily. Bedding is changed once a week. Laundry is done by staff. The menu is prepared by a dietician and rotates every six weeks. Special diets are available as needed.

The GJ approves of the “step program” where youth can earn additional privileges. Youth have access to telephones unless they have a current sanction. Unlimited free postage and writing supplies are provided. Youth are aware that their mail may be read by staff. Family may visit for two hours on Saturday from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Special times for visits can be arranged with the approval of the supervisory staff. Visits are supervised, but privacy is observed.

Required Responses

Mendocino County Juvenile Hall Superintendent (All Findings; All Recommendations)

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

Mendocino County District Attorney (Findings 13-14)

Mendocino County Chief Probation Officer (All Findings, All Recommendations)

Director, Mendocino County General Services Agency (Finding 11; Recommendation 3)

Requested Responses

Director, MCOE Court/Community School (Finding 7; Recommendations 1, 6)

Director, Health & Human Services Agency, Children & Family Systems of Care (Findings 10-11; Recommendation 2)