

SIERRA CONSERVATION CENTER AND BASELINE FIRE CAMP

According to Section 919(b) of the California Penal Code, "The Grand Jury shall inquire into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county." Sierra Conservation Center and Baseline Fire Camp fall within this statute for Tuolumne County.

METHODOLOGY

Prior to a tour of the facilities, the Civil Grand Jury members met with the Acting Warden and the Chief Deputy Warden for a two (2) hour question and answer session in the administrative office area. Both officials were generous with their time and answered all questions from the panel members. The interviews, tours and cooperation from the staff established a sense of transparency, a high level of security, and openness in assisting the Civil Grand Jury.

The Tuolumne County Civil Grand Jury visited Sierra Conservation Center (SCC) on three (3) separate occasions and Base Line Fire Camp once. The tours of SCC included the Administration Offices, the three (3) levels of security yards, dining hall, medical and dental facilities, pharmacy, and the vocational training center. The tour of Baseline Fire Camp consisted of the dining hall, sleeping and living dorms, administrative facilities, vehicle maintenance, fabrication shop and the staging areas for fire vehicles and inmate fire fighters.

FINDINGS

1. The current inmate population at SCC is 3,550. SCC consists of three (3) separate facilities designed to incarcerate three (3) levels of inmates with different levels of security requirements. Panel members started the tour in the Level 1 facility which houses minimum security inmates. This area was a very relaxed atmosphere akin to a high school or junior college. Inmates live in a dorm setting consisting of 25 to 30 inmates. This area is also a staging area for Base Line Fire Camp where inmates train and progressively increase physical conditioning for fire fighting. Additionally, this area contains the various vocational training areas.
2. The vocational training area consists of inmate training for welding, masonry, carpentry, auto body repair, and computer training/repair. The computer training classes have "no internet access." These facilities are designed to give inmates hardware repair and programming experience. Due to State budget restraints, the vocational programs for Graphic Arts and Printing, as well as the Mill and Cabinet shop have been shutdown.
3. When entering the Level 2 medium/minimum security area, panel members commented on the change in atmosphere. This area definitely had the feeling of a prison. Hundreds of inmates were milling around a track, or isolated into small groups. Handball and basketball seemed to be the two (2) main sports being played. The housing consists of a dayroom area with two (2) occupant cells, each approximately eight (8) feet by twelve (12) feet, located along the perimeter of the dayroom. The inmates are secured and locked down at night or when

circumstances dictate. This area has a large indoor gym that formally housed inmates sleeping on three (3) tiered cots. Last year's jury commented on the over crowding of this area. During the tenure of the 2009-2010 Civil Grand Jury, this area of housing was eliminated. All inmates housed in this gym were absorbed into other parts of the prison population.

4. Panel members found the Level 3 medium security facility to be very similar to the Level 2 facility, just with more correctional officers present. Inmates have the option of staying locked down, thus limiting their exposure to inmate politics. Members spoke with two (2) of these inmates who indicated they only leave their cells twice a day. Once is for one (1) hour for exercise and to shower, and once to attend religious classes. These particular inmates had been incarcerated for five (5) years with eight (8) years remaining and fifteen (15) years with fourteen (14) years left. Neither chose to disclose why they were in prison. The indoor gym in this area is still being used to house inmates. The gym is grossly overcrowded with inmates sleeping on three (3) tier cots.
5. Civil Grand Jury members found the dining hall to be very clean and well organized. Inmates cook and distribute the food. SCC is able to feed 1,250 inmates every hour and thirty minutes. There are special security measures in place for the dining hall. A correctional officer is stationed on an overhead gallery with a variety of weapons to stop an outbreak of violence, should it occur. The correctional officer can use gas pellets or a weapon shooting hard, wooden dowels. These weapons are considered enough to stop any outbreak.
6. Members toured the prison hospital and medical facilities. In 2009, with an inmate population of approximately 5,500, there were 1,700 inmate requests for medical assistance. With current budget constraints and Federal Court mandates, employee furloughs have created the need for an extreme increase in overtime to staff the medical facilities. This will be an ongoing problem with no resolution anytime soon.
7. The general hospital area includes a mental health department, dentist offices, a pharmacy, and an eye care office. All of the facilities were very clean and well maintained. Last year's jury noted the hospital's mattresses were substandard. This problem area has been corrected.
8. A current major problem area for SCC is contraband cell phones in the lockup areas. Currently, there is no law preventing or deterring the possession or smuggling of cell phones into lockup facilities. The California Legislature is negotiating a law, but has not agreed on a punishment for the violation of the new law. Correctional officers make numerous unannounced searches of inmates for these phones. The SCC administration has established "Operation Disconnect" to make surprise searches of both correctional officers and support staff to halt smuggling of phones. Employees are set aside at the start of their shift and searched before going on duty.
9. Base Line Fire Camp currently houses between 128 and 134 inmate fire fighters. 17 inmates make up a "strike team" and are trained and ready to respond to wild land fires in Tuolumne County or any place in the state and even outside California through mutual aid pacts. Approximately 80 % of the wild land fire fighting within the county is performed by these teams. SCC is responsible for all

of the prisoner fire camps in California. One of the teams demonstrated their readiness by exiting the transport vehicle, being issued the tools and power equipment, and establishing a camp beside their truck. Within minutes, the team was ready to join paid fire fighters on the fire line.

10. Base Line is self sustaining as far as maintenance of vehicles, power tools, hand tools, clothing, packs, and protective gear is concerned. All of this maintenance is performed by inmates under correctional officer supervision. The protective clothing is made using fire resistant material. The shop areas were well maintained, clean, and well organized.
11. When not maintaining a high level of physical conditioning or fighting fires, the inmates assist communities by cutting defensible fire breaks along highways, clearing and cleaning school grounds when students are not present, and cutting fire breaks around public utility equipment. During the off season, the teams clean and clear campgrounds and, if necessary, fill and stack sandbags for flood relief.
12. The facilities and grounds at Base Line do not resemble a prison. Inmates are housed in barracks where they have individual cots and foot lockers. Inmates' families can come to the camp on weekends to enjoy picnics or cookouts. The dining hall is small, but can feed the inmates in less than one (1) hour. The kitchen area was clean and adequate for food preparation. Base Line inmates are fed higher caloric meals to compensate for the greater physical activity level. Cost of food for each inmate is approximately \$2.57 per day. Medical care for an inmate is provided at SCC.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There are no recommendations for Findings 1, 3, 5, and 7 through 11.
2. For Finding 2, the jury recommends the State continue funding the Graphic Arts and Printing class, as well as the Mill and Cabinet Shop. Each of these programs creates inmate skills that may keep an inmate from returning to prison.
3. For Finding 4, the over crowded gym in the Level 3 facility should be closed for inmate housing just as was done with the Level 2 facility gym.
4. For Finding 6, staffing for the hospital and medical facilities should be reviewed for cost effectiveness. Paying overtime to staff these facilities does not appear to be the best use of limited funds.

REMARKS

The Tuolumne County Civil Grand Jury would like to point out that SCC is one of the largest employers in the county and is a very important economical asset.

SCC is also a good neighbor. Many employees, in their off duty time, participate in charitable fund raising within the county. Last year, 2009, SCC employees donated approximately \$11,000 to various causes in Tuolumne County. Inmates contributed nearly \$3,000 during the same period.