

EL DORADO COUNTY
GRAND JURY 2020-2021
REPORT



**INSPECTION OF COUNTY JAILS AND
JUVENILE TREATMENT CENTER**

CASE 20-02

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SUMMARY

The 2020-2021 Grand Jury conducted its annual assessment of El Dorado County's correctional and detention facilities differently than in previous years. Usually, jurors visit the jails and Juvenile Treatment Center (JTC) in person. However, this year's COVID-19 pandemic changed the normal inspection format from physical to virtual.

BACKGROUND

The jails in El Dorado County, located in South Lake Tahoe (SLT) and Placerville, are older facilities. Both operate under the supervision of the El Dorado County Sheriff's Office. The SLT jail, originally constructed in 1973, underwent additions and modifications during the 1980s. The SLT jail can house up to 158 inmates. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, inmate population at SLT numbered around 145. The Placerville jail, constructed in 1988, can accommodate 303 inmates. Pre-COVID-19 numbers for the Placerville facility averaged 245 in custody. These numbers have decreased by around 10% since March 2020 with continued efforts to reduce inmate population in both jails.

Throughout most of the pandemic, the California Department of Corrections has not allowed transfers of jail inmates who have been sentenced to state prisons. To facilitate social distancing and to reduce the spread of COVID-19 within the prison system, the State requires these inmates to be held in County jails until it has the ability to safely place them. As of March 2021, El Dorado County jails housed 14 such inmates, eight males and six females, divided between SLT and Placerville.

The JTC, located in South Lake Tahoe, operates under the administration of the El Dorado County Probation Department and contains 40 beds. As of January 2021, the JTC held a population of 11 wards, including two from neighboring counties.

Examining safety and security in these facilities continues to be the Grand Jury's priority, along with ensuring inmates and detained wards receive fair and humane treatment. The California Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) establishes and oversees regulatory standards for the construction, operation and administration of county detention facilities. The BSCC will close down a jail if it remains in a state of disrepair.

The COVID-19 crisis that began in March 2020, posed distinctive challenges for jails and juvenile treatment centers. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (CDC):

Correctional and detention facilities can include custody, housing, education, recreation, health care, food service and workplace components in a *single physical* setting. The integration of

these components presents unique challenges for the control of COVID-19 transmission among incarcerated/detained persons, staff, and visitors.¹

Staff at both jails and the JTC recognize the crucial importance of adhering to public health guidelines during the pandemic. They made the necessary adjustments to their practices to ensure the safety of staff, inmates and wards.

METHODOLOGY

- Reviewed past El Dorado Grand Jury reports
- Reviewed the latest BSCC inspection report
- Reviewed Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website:
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/correction-detention/guidance-correctional-detention.html>
- Interviewed jails and JTC administration and staff
- Reviewed jails and JTC maintenance logs

DISCUSSION

Virtual Inspection of Jail Facilities

Those interviewed reported that the Placerville and SLT jails remain in excellent condition. They uphold a high standard of cleanliness. County maintenance crews provide the support needed to ensure that operations run smoothly within both facilities. Jail administrators and staff work closely with maintenance workers to uphold a high level of cleanliness and assure regular preventive care is performed at both jails.

Metal detectors in the lobbies of both jails are functioning properly. Last fall, both facilities installed full body scanners that are reportedly operating effectively.

Housing units, referred to as “pods”, house inmates largely in accordance with their ability to associate with others. Some inmates are housed in isolation based on their criminal charges, combativeness, gang affiliation, mental state and other issues that could make them a danger to others, or make others a danger to them. These inmates do not have direct contact with other inmates at any time. Rival gang members are segregated. Informants and inmates charged with sexual misconduct against minors are housed separately from the general population. The general population includes those charged with theft, battery, assault, burglary, drugs and lesser crimes. Many inmates have mental health problems but remain unsegregated unless a safety or behavioral issue exists.

COVID-19 necessitated the need to reduce the number of inmates that eat and gather at one time. High-risk inmates eat one at a time, while four to six inmates per tier in Placerville, and no more than four in SLT take their meals and socialize at designated times. Before the pandemic, as many as 32 in Placerville, and 16 in SLT congregated in the common areas.

Wellpath, an independent medical care provider, contracts with the County to provide services to inmates. A Registered Nurse (RN) works at the jails during the day and a Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN) takes over at night. Psychiatric/Psychological services are also available. Additionally, *Wellpath* employs a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) to assist with mental health issues.

Wellpath tests incoming inmates for COVID-19 onsite. They are then placed under quarantine for at least 14 days. Temperatures are taken daily. Symptomatic/exposed inmates also undergo quarantine for 14 days. All inmates can request a COVID-19 test.

Quarantine areas and intake rooms are disinfected several times daily. Day rooms, eating areas and all touch surfaces also undergo routine mandatory cleaning.

At the time of our interviews, the Placerville jail had reported two cases of COVID-19. Three inmates exposed to the virus remained under quarantine.

Beginning in March 2020, the jails suspended in-person visits by family and friends. Both jails only permit essential workers such as attorneys, clinicians, therapists, and social workers to visit with inmates. *Wellpath* screens everyone entering the facilities. Both sides of visitation booths receive a stringent cleaning after each visit.

Inmates have access to computer tablets for learning and entertainment. Usage depends on good behavior. The Network Computer Integrating Company (NCIC) provides the controlled internet access that comes preloaded onto these tablets. Since the suspension of in-person visits, inmates use ZOOM for video contact with family and friends. They are limited to three (3) "free" video visits per month with a maximum of one per week. Inmates can also purchase messaging software through which family members and others can respond to inmate messages free of charge. The jails allow only one message per week. Staff manages the distribution of these tablets. Inmates can also access "Earn and Learn" courses for points they can redeem for entertainment programs. Officers review these recorded video calls and messages daily. There are only 170 tablets between both jails. This limited number makes it difficult for all inmates to participate in distance learning and other computer-based activities.

During pre-COVID times, inmates joined together for religious services within the jails or they could request a visit from a clergy member. In accordance with COVID-19 guidelines, religious group activities remain suspended. However, the jails now allow inmates to visit one-on-one with a volunteer church layperson in the attorney/visitor booths or they can visit virtually with clergy via ZOOM.

The El Dorado County Office of Education (EDCOE) offers a range of classes at both jails. Inmates can complete General Education Development (GED) requirements to obtain a high school diploma. Since COVID-19, teachers no longer come to the facilities but provide instruction via distance learning. Teachers drop off and pick-up education packets weekly.

Court-ordered programs for anger management and substance abuse, normally held in groups, have been temporarily suspended. While administrative staff recognize the importance of these programs, they stress the greater importance of safeguarding the health of the entire jail population. These programs will resume once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

The award-winning culinary arts program remains active at the Placerville jail. SLT will resume its schedule when the program manager returns from a leave of absence. To participate in the program, inmates must complete a Food Safety course. Qualified candidates prepare meals under the supervision of a registered dietician and staff cook. Culinary workers are organized into groups of six. These groups prepare and serve meals to staff and inmates three times daily. Inmates also assist in the preparation of meals and perform other kitchen duties. At the time of this writing, one group of six inmates participated in the Placerville jail's culinary program.

Both jails have been aggressive in their efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among staff and inmates. Since the beginning of the pandemic, staff have undergone daily screening for symptoms, and have their temperatures taken each day. They continue to adhere to public health guidelines that promote essential sanitation practices and personal safety protocols. Those interviewed reported an adequate stock of personal protection equipment (PPE) and cleaning supplies available at both jails. Neither jail reported any staff shortages due to the pandemic.

Only one positive test result for COVID-19 was reported among Placerville jail staff. Staff has been instructed that, when feeling ill or after exposure to the virus, they must remain at home. Working from home, of course, is impossible for jail staff because of the hands-on nature of the jobs performed. Fortunately, staffing issues have been solved by working within both jails to pool available personnel.

Placerville Jail

Measures to improve safety continue at the Placerville jail. New doors with food ports and better and more secure lock systems have been installed. Medium security blocks are being converted to maximum-security blocks. A newly-retrofitted block with 18 beds currently houses prison inmates. Glass walls and metal bars now surround the jail's sobering cell, allowing for easier observation.

A \$25 million grant, provided under California Senate Bill 844, has apportioned funds for the jail's expansion. Preliminary plans include a separate housing unit for female inmates. Additionally, a new medical wing will contain 14 beds, six more than the current number. Plans also call for the construction of several Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant cells, technical and programming spaces and a computer lab.

South Lake Tahoe (SLT) Jail

Because the SLT jail contains no medical wing, only minimal care can be provided. Inmates requiring more serious medical treatment are transferred to Barton Hospital or to the Placerville jail, where more staff and better resources exist.

Maximizing space remains a challenge. Reconfiguration plans for the facility include adding a new eight-person housing unit to the "old side" of the building, and converting the "old yard" into an ADA accessible recreation area. Options are also being explored for creating a medical wing within the facility, and exploring different ways to better equip classrooms with technology.

Juvenile Treatment Center (JTC)

Interviewed staff reported the facility to be in good condition, however, response times for maintenance requests from the County Facilities Division have been slow. As of January 2021, the Division employed one supervisor and one general maintenance worker in South Lake Tahoe. Ongoing recruitment efforts to find workers with more specialized skills, such as plumbing and electrical, continue.

JTC staff continues to meet the physical and mental health needs of its wards. It also maintains a contract with *Wellpath* for medical care within the facility. A Registered Nurse works six mornings per week, Monday through Saturday to dispense medication and attend to sick calls. A Nurse Practitioner makes rounds once each week. In addition, mental health program coordinator, licensed therapist, psychiatrist and other staff provide mental health care.

Wards exercise in the JTC's outdoor recreation area. The Facilities Division continues to explore solutions for providing some source of heat, including radiant heat options. However, cost remains a concern.

The current COVID-19 pandemic created new challenges for JTC staff and the wards housed there. New intakes must undergo onsite COVID-19 testing by *Wellpath* and remain quarantined for a minimum of 14 days. Symptomatic and/or exposed wards must also remain isolated for up to 14 days. While no significant mental health issues related to COVID-19 have been reported, some wards have expressed their fears and concerns regarding the pandemic.

As of April 2020, the JTC suspended family visits and temporary releases. Only lawyers, clinicians, therapists, and, most recently, church volunteers are allowed visitation. Both sides of visitation booths are sanitized after each visit.

Fortunately, the increased use of technologies such as ZOOM allow for visitation with family. ZOOM also facilitates distance learning with teachers via the internet. Daily education classes with books and tablets help students to maintain their educational goals. Teachers pick up and return assignments each week. Wards can also enroll in software programs such as Changes and Challenges, court-mandated programs that prepare them for life upon release. Staff reported that, while most wards welcome the chance to continue their studies, they miss the personal interaction with their teachers.

The JTC offers its wards Bible study classes once each week. Two local church volunteers' direct religious activities and wards can now attend church services in person on Fridays in the facility's group contact room.

Staff continue to stress the importance of consistent structure, and encourage socialization under these new and challenging circumstances. They do their best to practice social distancing by creating seating charts for meals and limiting the number of wards allowed in the recreation center at one time. All staff and wards wear masks. Disinfecting of the facility takes place multiple times each day. Although the JTC struggled in the beginning to obtain enough (PPE) and other essential provisions, it currently maintains an adequate inventory of supplies.

The COVID-19 pandemic has sometimes created staffing shortages for the JTC. However, members of the Probation Department fill in where needed. Meanwhile, JTC staff continue to undergo screening for COVID-19, and must stay home when feeling ill.

Future Juvenile Treatment Center Plans

Plans exist for the construction of a new 20-bed JTC on the site of the former Sheriff's Department headquarters in Placerville. A \$9.6 million State construction grant will pay most of the cost. The Board of Supervisors also directed the formation of recommendations for repurposing the SLT building after the new Placerville facility opens. The new, state-of-the-art JTC will offer a more homelike environment than the current facility.

FINDINGS

- F1. El Dorado County jails provide only 170 computer tablets between the Placerville and SLT locations. At normal capacity, the combined number of inmates equals 390.
- F2. Court-ordered classes for narcotics and alcohol abuse and anger management have been temporarily suspended at both jails due to COVID-19.
- F3. The outdoor recreation center at the JTC has no source of heat, therefore, making the area minimally usable for much of the year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. Both jails should explore options for the purchase of additional computer tablets to provide wider opportunities for inmates to access educational and self-improvement programs.
- R2. Both jails should consider temporary alternatives, either one-on-one visits or virtual support courses for court-ordered substance abuse and anger management programs. These could be similar to the Challenges and Changes virtual programs offered at the JTC.
- R3. The JTC should continue to work with the Facilities Division in its exploration of heating alternatives for its outdoor recreation center.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

This Grand Jury report is an account of an investigation or review. It contains findings and recommendations, and names those who should respond to each finding and each recommendation pertaining to matters under the respondent's control.

Please review *How to Respond to an El Dorado County Grand Jury Report*, a separate document included with this report.

Responses are requested in accordance with California Penal Code §933 and §933.05.

- **Responses to Findings F1, F2 and Recommendations R1, R2, are requested from the El Dorado County Sheriff.**
- **Responses to Findings F3 and Recommendation R3 are requested from the El Dorado County Chief Probation Officer.**

¹ "Interim Guidance on Management of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Correctional and Detention Facilities," United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Updated Dec. 31, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/correction-detention/guidance-correctional-detention.html>