Monitoring Tour of Stateville Correctional Center
September 14, 2010

Summary: Too many responsibilities, not enough resources.

On September 14, 2010, eight representatives of the John Howard Association of Illinois conducted a monitoring tour of Stateville Correctional Center. Opened in 1925, Stateville contains maximum-security, protective custody, and a medical unit. Stateville also serves as the Northern Reception and Classification Center for Cook and its collar counties. The Northern R&C is tasked with receiving inmates, assessing their risk status and health issues, transporting them to and from court if necessary, and ultimately sending them to an appropriate facility.

Marcus Hardy has been Warden of Stateville for almost one year. Warden Hardy has done a commendable job managing Stateville’s multiple functions and working to bring volunteers into Stateville to increase the facility’s limited educational and vocational opportunities. However, Warden Harvey’s efforts are often hamstrung by the fact that the prison is given too many responsibilities without adequate resources.

The Context

To understand current conditions at Stateville, it is necessary to appreciate two significant problems the facility faces.
Like all of Illinois’ prisons, Stateville has long suffered from a lack of resources, but the state’s budget crisis has made this problem worse. In recent months, the state has had problems paying venders who are already contracted to deliver goods and services. This issue affects all aspects of the prison.

One telling example is sanitation. Cockroaches are a chronic problem throughout the prison, according to staff and inmates. When JHA representatives asked Warden Hardy about this issue, he agreed and attributed the problem to the fact that the prison’s exterminator has not been able to adequately do his job because the state has repeatedly failed to pay for his services on time.

Stateville’s lack of resources is compounded by the fact that it serves as the Northern Reception and Classification Center for all incoming inmates from the northern part of the state, the region that sends the most inmates to IDOC. This operation puts a significant strain on resources that the prison does not possess in abundance. The Northern R&C houses more inmates than Stateville proper—on September 26, the R&C housed 2,036, while Stateville housed 1,584.

Warden Hardy is acutely aware of these problems, but the reality is that there is little either he or the Department of Corrections can do to solve them. As long as the state continues to send record numbers of people to prison, the Department of Corrections has to incarcerate them, regardless of its ability to do so.

Because the budget crisis is hurting all state agencies, it may seem tempting to ignore the situation of our state prisons. That would be a serious mistake. These problems create significant safety concerns for inmates and staff. And of course, poor prison conditions also present a safety risk for the general public, as the overwhelming majority of people who are sent to prison will eventually be released back into society.
Medical and Mental Health Care

Medical and correctional staff said the Health Care Unit has significant understaffing problems. For example, there is no permanent Nursing Director.

That position is being filled on a temporary basis by a Wexford Health Sources employee who is not licensed to work as a nurse in Illinois.

Deficits in hours of service are in most instances made up by overtime. Many medical staff are working 64 hours a week or more. This is expensive and can lead to employee burnout and mistakes in care.

Staff said the 32-bed infirmary is nearly always full. Patient-inmates must sometimes be sent back to their cells and treated there to free an infirmary bed for an inmate more in need of it. Meanwhile, the 10-bed infirmary at the Reception and Classification Center is unstaffed and empty.

Staff said they must send some inmates to other institutions for dialysis because Stateville is unable to treat the number of patients requiring it. The physical therapist has yet to see some patient-inmates who made their appointment in 2009.

Patients needing sophisticated care such as orthopedic or gastro-intestinal surgery generally go to the University of Illinois Medical Center. Staff said they are unable to get quick treatment for patient-inmates, however.

Medical staff said that staff shortages similar to those cited above have been the norm at Stateville for at least four years. They said the situation has worsened recently.
On the positive side, Stateville has its full complement of five authorized physicians and psychiatrists. Medical staff said they expect to hire a psychologist in the foreseeable future, bringing the prison to its full complement of seven.

Mental health services are especially important at Stateville, as 951 inmates are receiving psychiatric care and 532 are receiving psychotropic medication.

*Observations:* Stateville’s population is aging as many inmates are serving long sentences or life terms. This means they need more medical and mental health care than the typical prison. This need is likely to be magnified in the future as the longer sentences handed down over the past two decades lead to an increasingly elderly prison population.

*Recommendation:* Fully staff Stateville’s medical and mental health care staff.

**Inmate Mail and Visiting Hours**

Nearly every inmate JHA interviewed reported significant problems with the mail service and visiting hours. It can take as long as three months to receive a letter, and visitors have to wait as long as three hours before they could see a family or loved one, according to some inmates.

While Warden Hardy said it has never taken longer than six-weeks for an inmate to receive a letter, he confirmed that there were delays in mail and visiting. He attributed these problems to a lack of staffing. He also told JHA that since he became Warden, he has made it a priority to decrease these delays.

*Observation:* It is taking too long for inmates to receive mail, and visitor are waiting too long before they can see their friend or family member.


**Recommendation:** Prison administration should continue to work to bring down these delays.

**F-House**

Stateville is home to F-House, the only functioning panopticon left in the United States. The brainchild of 19th century British philosopher Jeremy Bentham, panopticons have a single center tower with rows of cells circled around it. The purpose of this design was intended to make it easier for one observer to monitor large groups of inmates. Bentham argued that the panopticon would also create “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind,” as inmates would internalize the tower’s gaze and eventually learn to monitor themselves.

Whatever lofty goals Bentham envisioned for his panopticons, the reality of Stateville’s F-House is far from ideal. As soon as the inmates begin to shout to each other, the room acts as an amplifier and is soon deafening. While the observation tower is supposed to enable corrections officer to effectively monitor inmates, it is hard to believe this is possible, as the cell doors are almost impossible to see through.

The F-House contains four different classifications of prisoners. It houses inmates in segregation, inmates who are appealing their removal from protective custody, general population inmates, and inmates bound for court in the northern part of Illinois.
The F-House presents several security issues. Given that its structure allows inmates to easily communicate with one another, it is ill suited for segregation, which is intended to isolate inmates from one another. It is unfair to subject non-segregated inmates to segregation, and puts a strain on staff to manage so many different kinds of population in a single house. Holding such diverse populations together violates a basic principle of correctional policy.

*Observation: F-House has too many different and conflicting classifications of inmates and is ill equipped for inmates in segregation.*

*Recommendation: Ideally Department of Corrections would close the F-House. Until that happens, prison administration should find alternative space for its inmates in segregation.*

**X-House**

X-House is where Stateville once housed death row inmates. Today it houses inmates who are in protective custody. Staff JHA interviewed reported serious safety concerns about X-House. They felt that the walls were not thick enough and that the doors lacked adequate locks, both of which presented escape risks.

*Observation: X-House seems ill suited to house inmates.*

*Recommendation: While space is limited, prison administration should explore the possibility of closing X-House.*

**Programming**

Like all maximum-security prisons in Illinois, Stateville has extremely limited educational or vocational opportunities. The prison offers a small GED program, a barber program, as well as a handful of on-site industries jobs, but most inmates have nothing to do but sit in their cell. Moreover, while the average length of stay is one year, Stateville houses many long-term prisoners
who are sentenced to 20 years or more. It is the policy of the Department of Corrections to allow inmates with shorter sentences to take available educational and vocational classes before inmates with longer sentences. While this policy is designed to ensure that inmates are prepared to reenter society, it has the unintended of consequence of barring long-term prisoners from participating in programming.

Staff interviewed by JHA all said that the lack of programming created security risks for themselves and inmates. “We have to give these guys something to do,” said one correction officer. “If we don’t, they’re going to be more likely to cause problems.”

Since he came to Stateville in December, Warden Hardy has worked to provide additional educational and vocational opportunities for inmates. During his brief tenure, Warden Hardy has hosted several volunteer programs, including Lutheran Social Services Story Book Program that enables incarcerated fathers to send recorded stories to their children and the SMART program that teaches inmates stress management techniques.

Observation: While Stateville needs more educational and vocational programming, prison administration should be commended for recruiting volunteers.

Recommendation: Prison administration should continue to explore how volunteers can increase educational opportunities, especially for long-term prisoners who otherwise would be unlikely to participate in prison programming.
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Since 1901, JHA has provided public oversight of Illinois’ juvenile and adult correctional facilities. Every year, JHA staff and trained volunteers inspect prisons, jails and detention centers throughout the state. Based on these inspections, JHA regularly issues reports instrumental in improving prison conditions.

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