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Report No. 4: Merced County Downtown Jail

Mandated Inspection

Introduction:

On March 21, 2007, members of the Grand Jury inspected the jail at 700 West 22nd Street, Merced.

Method of Investigation:

The Grand Jury members met with Correctional Officer Baker, the acting shift supervisor, who provided an overview of the jail operations and gave the Grand Jury members a tour of the facility.

Findings:

On the date of the review of the facility, there were 157 inmates in custody, 23 below its maximum capacity of 180. The Grand Jury members were shown the operations center, which controls all of the doors, gates and entryways. The operations center also monitors all of the closed circuit cameras of the entire facility. Grand Jury members were also shown the booking process, which included the operation of the Live Scan computerized fingerprinting and how this system is tied into both the State and Federal database systems. The Merced County Sheriff's Department now contracts with the California Forensic Medical Group for all medical services at the main jail. The medical department was inspected and the medical staff was interviewed. The medical staff provides 24-hour coverage for the jail. Mental health providers make weekly scheduled visits and are available on an on-call basis. The current medical and mental health services provided at the facility are a major improvement from the previous inspections conducted by the Grand Jury. The kitchen and meal service was also inspected. The jail serves two hot meals and one cold meal per day. The meals served were well balanced and appeared to be more than adequate. All of the cells were inspected, including the safety cells and administrative segregation cells which are used for inmates that have medical issues, are violent or suicidal.

The use of video taping in the booking area and cells on a 24 hour basis is not being done. Those areas are only video taped when there is a problem. The Grand Jury had previously recommended those areas be video taped 24 hours a day. Riot equipment has been relocated and is much more accessible in emergency situations. The Merced County Sheriff's Department now provides it's correctional officers with new protective vests, which can prevent penetration from knives or sharp objects commonly made by jail inmates.

The Merced County Sheriff's Department has requested four additional correctional officers and one correctional sergeant in their 2007/2008 budgets.

Recommendations:

The Sheriff's Department should review their policy on video taping the main jail on a 24-hour basis. Even though it is more expensive it could reduce the liability to the county as well as document the actions of the inmates.

The Sheriff's Department needs to continue to effectively manage the overcrowding problem when it arises and to explore future options for potential increases in inmate population.

REPORT NO. 5: MERCED COUNTY JAIL

John Latorraca Correctional Facility

MANDATED INSPECTION

INTRODUCTION:

On March 27, 2007, members of the Grand Jury inspected the John Latorraca Correctional Facility at 2564 West Sandy Mush Road, Merced.

Method of Investigation:

The California Penal Code Section 919 mandates the Grand Jury to conduct annual inspections of the correctional facilities within Merced County. The Grand Jury members met with Commander Scott, the facility commander. Commander Scott provided an overview of the daily operations of the facility then gave the Grand Jury members a tour of the facility.

Findings:

On the date of the tour of the facility, there were 542 inmates in-custody, and the jail has a maximum capacity of 620. There is an average of 80% male inmates and 20% female inmates. A large percentage of inmates are in-custody for serious or violent crimes.

The ratio of correctional officers to inmates continues to remain low. Currently on dayshift there were 9 officers plus 2 held over on overtime. They routinely operate with 2-3 correctional officers short, on day shift. Commander Scott advised the overtime for correctional officers last year was \$250,000. He anticipates the current year overtime budget to be almost double of last year's. There were three correctional officers hired from last year's budget allocation. Currently, Commander Scott is requesting 6-8 correctional officers and 4 correctional sergeants for this year's budget request. Due to the shortage, they are purchasing more closed circuit cameras to help monitor the facility. The Sheriff's Department also purchased "shank proof" protective vest for all of the correctional officers at a cost of \$70,000. Additionally, the facilities riot

gear has been updated and relocated for easier access. This was a recommendation from the previous year's Grand Jury report.

The Grand Jury members toured the various dormitories, maximum-security cells and safety cells. They also toured the facilities kitchen. The kitchen serves two hot meals and a cold meal to each inmate, each day, serving an average of 3150 meals per day. The facilities kitchen also provides meals for the main jail and juvenile hall. The meals were well-balanced, good quality and have sufficient quantity. The kitchen was very clean and well organized. Due to staff shortages, there are no correctional officers in the kitchen while inmates prepare meals. A civilian cook oversees the meal preparation and supervises the inmates.

The Grand Jury members toured the medical facility. The Merced County Sheriff's Department contracts all medical services with the California Forensic Medical Group. They provide 24-hour coverage for all medical services at the facility. They average 15-25 patient inmates per day. A mental health doctor is available to the inmates once a week and a dentist comes in approximately every two weeks. The current medical services and availability is very good and has improved from previous years. Medical service problems had been addressed in previous Grand Jury reports.

Recommendations:

The Sheriff and staff should continue to meet with correctional officers and staff at the facility in order for him to stay informed on current issues and concerns.

The Merced County Board of Supervisors should inspect the facility annually.

Budget request for additional correctional officers should be obtained to meet operational expenses. This would eliminate many of the current problems at the facility, as well as a safety issue for the correctional officers and liability to the county.

Commendations:

The staffs of the John Latorraca Correctional Facility are to be commended for the professional manner and their commitment to their duties under such stressful conditions.