

COUNTY OF TUOLUMNE
GRAND JURY
12855 Justice Center Drive
Sonora CA, 95370



Tuolumne County Grand Jury Jail and Prison Facilities Report, June 30th, 2023

**Dambacher Detention Center, Sierra Conservation Center
and Mother Lode Regional Juvenile Detention Facility**



Sierra Conservation Center

Photo provided by Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

SUMMARY

The 2022-2023 Tuolumne County Grand Jury Jail Committee visited all three County facilities to report on conditions there. The Jail Committee:

- Interviewed Tuolumne County Sheriff Pooley
- Took thorough, escorted tours of all three facilities including:
 - Dambacher Detention Center
 - Sierra Conservation Center
 - Mother Lode Regional Juvenile Detention Facility

All personnel cooperated with the Jail Committee and were generous with their time answering questions and escorting us wherever we requested. The committee was impressed by all staff's dedication to providing quality care for their residents and to ensuring the safety of Tuolumne County citizens.

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

INTRODUCTION

Mandated Yearly Grand Jury Visits

California Penal Code § 919(b) mandates that the Grand Jury in each county inspect the condition of all public prisons every year “to be assured that they are being administered efficiently, honestly, and in the best interests of Tuolumne County’s citizens.” Sections 919(a), 925, and 925a authorize the Grand Jury to investigate city and county jails and other detention facilities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SUMMARY	2
INTRODUCTION	3
TABLE OF CONTENTS	4
METHODOLOGY	5
CHAPTER 1: DAMBACHER DETENTION CENTER – DISCUSSION, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND COMMENDATIONS	6
CHAPTER 2: MOTHER LODE REGIONAL JUVENILE DETENTION FACILITY- DISCUSSION, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND COMMENDATIONS	8
CHAPTER 3: SIERRA CONSERVATION CENTER- DISCUSSION, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND COMMENDATIONS	11
REQUESTED RESPONSES.....	15

METHODOLOGY

The committee visited and interviewed staff at:

- Dambacher Detention Center December 19, 2022
- Sierra Conservation Center December 16, 2022
- Mother Lode Regional Juvenile Detention Facility November 3, 2022

Confidentiality

Grand Jury members are sworn to secrecy regarding any matter brought before them. This assures all individuals that their testimony will be strictly confidential. Each Grand Juror must keep all evidence confidential. It is a misdemeanor to violate the confidentiality of any individual or evidence brought before the Grand Jury.

Recusal

The Grand Jury recognizes that a conflict of interest may arise during its investigations. In such instances, the juror may ask to be recused from all aspects of an investigation. Those members do not investigate, attend interviews and deliberations, or assist in the making and acceptance of a final report that may result from an investigation.

Therefore, whenever the perception of a conflict of interest existed on the part of a member of the 2022-2023 Tuolumne County Grand Jury, that member abstained from any investigation involving such a conflict and from voting on the acceptance or rejections of any related subject.

CHAPTER 1: DAMBACHER DETENTION CENTER – DISCUSSION, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND COMMENDATIONS

Discussion

The maximum occupancy of the jail is 230. Current occupancy runs about 62%. Officials prefer to keep the population around 115 because of staffing shortages and Covid. The maximum sentence for California county jails used to be up to 1 year. To reduce prison overcrowding, the state went through a prison realignment. When Assembly Bill 109 was passed by California voters in 2011, some felons from state prisons who were lower-level offenders became eligible for county jail time. After the realignment, the maximum sentence can be extended to an indeterminate length of time due to inmate circumstances.

Because the inmates may now have a lengthy stay at the jail, programs similar to those at the prison are being adopted. Prisoners may be enrolled in Medi-Cal and receive extensive medical and dental care. Education programs exist to enable inmates to earn a high school diploma. Motherlode Job Training also assists inmates. There is also dialog with Columbia College to create inmate education programs. Mental and behavioral health programs exist throughout the county. Volunteer programs also exist, such as Narcotics Anonymous & Alcoholics Anonymous and religious programs.

The jail is spacious and has room to grow in both staff and inmate populations. The jail appears clean and well maintained. We first passed by several administration, conference, and training rooms. Staff have a dining room where two meals each day are served.

We toured the inmate intake area where new arrivals are processed. There are two booking stations. Staff takes the inmates through a process that is intended to determine their mental and emotional state as well as their criminal history. Inmates proceed through identification process and a body scan. A Property Room stores inmates' personal items. We learned that a transportation van takes inmates to the nearby courthouse; also, a low-risk inmate may be walked over.

A single control room visually oversees all rooms and halls and controls the locks (excluding the cell pods). Most areas of the jail are under some kind of surveillance. During the tour we saw the kitchen, laundry, library, medical, and education areas. All areas were very clean and organized.

Findings

F1. The Jail is currently short staffed. Not all programs are functioning at their full capacity.

F2. Due to the staffing shortage, there are no longer inmate work crews. The work program contributed to a significant reduction in recidivism and tracking shows 72% of those enrolled in work programs don't come back.

Recommendations

R1. Continue the dialogue with the Board of Supervisors to ensure competitive wages and benefits for the staff. [F1-F2]

R2. Share updates proactively with the local press and social media to help increase awareness of the benefits the institution provides to the community. [F3]

Commendations

C1. We felt confident that the facility was safe, secure, and had staff interested in helping their residents.

CHAPTER 2: MOTHER LODE REGIONAL JUVENILE DETENTION FACILITY – DISCUSSION, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND COMMENDATIONS

DISCUSSION

Motherlode Regional Juvenile Detention Facility partners with five other counties. Youth may come from these other counties to be served by the Detention Facility if space is not available or provided by their county. Consent from a legal guardian is required for detainees from other counties unless the youth has been previously adjudicated and remanded by the court to juvenile hall.

The Detention Facility provides the minimum standard for local detention facilities as required by Title 15 for Prevention and Corrections. The Detention Facility also boasts a huge volunteer base to provide additional services. After being open for over five years, the center expresses that it has its services “nailed down.”

The Wellpath health care system, a private business, services the Detention Facility. The Wellpath system coordinates medical, dental, optical, and mental healthcare. Some care is given onsite and other services are off grounds. Youth are provided triage and sick calls. Comprehensive health assessments are produced for each youth. There is a small medical office with one nurse, and an adjacent small examination room. A doctor visits once a week for scheduled services. The nurse was present and is scheduled for a twenty-hour week. There is also a registered nurse on the staff. Nurses are mostly on call and are local. Emergency services are provided as needed.

The Detention Facility contracts with Health and Human Services for additional outside care. The Smile Keepers provide cleanings and checkups. There are also outside vision services provided. Tele site services are used to coordinate and provide psychiatric needs. Detainees often require stabilization upon arrival. About two-thirds of detainees are on psychotropic medications.

There is not a dedicated counselor for the center, but counseling is provided by qualified staff and volunteers. Detainees are under continued evaluation to determine their physical and mental state. At-risk youth receive a “security classification” and are re-evaluated every thirty days.

There is a Multi-Disciplinary Team that meets weekly to discuss all services and bring family members into the programs where possible. Transitional planning is also provided to aid the youth after they leave the facility. Medical staff does not go through self-defense training, but an additional member of the Detention Facility staff is always present during doctor/nurse youth visits. A uniformed officer may also be called if necessary.

Youth are provided three meals per day. The food is brought over from the nearby jail as the center does not have a service kitchen.

Education services are provided by Gold Ridge Education Center, which is a fully accredited school that is exclusive to the Tuolumne County Juvenile Detention Facility. Youth can acquire a full diploma, not just a GED. Youth learn skills to help them live outside the center; for example, doing job interviews and filling out applications and creating resumes. Opportunities such as taking cooking classes and gardening also exist.

The juvenile hall is rated to house thirty youth up to age twenty-five. The population at the time we visited was sixteen residents. According to the staff, having fewer occupants enables more personalized care. The average duration of stay is fifty-eight to seventy-two days but can be longer. The Camp Program is for youth with longer stays at the facility and is individually structured. The Camp Program also aims to help older youth with planning for independent living outside the center.

We were told there is currently a shortage of staff that may affect the housing totals. Staff expects the center population to grow and cited the following reasons:

- The State closed its California Youth Authority prisons and juvenile offenders were turned back over to the respective counties.
- The state provided funding for counties to build detention centers, and many did which resulted in overbuilding.
- Tuolumne County was not able to fill the beds it anticipated upon its completion in 2017.
- Since then, many of these juvenile centers have closed because the counties found they could not, or didn't want to, run such facilities.
- Slowly, more youth are coming from out of the area and the population at the juvenile hall is expected to rise in the near future.

The good news is that with more beds filled, the County receives more revenue; however, a larger population could mean less effective rehabilitation programs and a rougher class of youth from neighboring counties, not to mention staffing issues.

The facility does mandatory searches inside and outside the facility. A police dog is also available to help with searches. Even with safeguards in place, including cameras, staff shared that supervision is still a challenge due to staff shortages.

Findings

- F4.** It is the shared opinion of the Grand Jury that the Tuolumne County Juvenile Detention Facility is a valuable and effective institution that is staffed by qualified and competent personnel. It was evident that staff are dedicated to helping the Youth exit the system successfully and build skills needed for successful lives outside the system.
- F5.** The detention center also benefits on a grand scale from its indispensable volunteer work force.

Recommendations

None

Commendations

- C2.** We were impressed by the level of detail provided to us about services and the clear dedication to your residents and the Tuolumne County Community.

CHAPTER 3: SIERRA CONSERVATION CENTER- DISCUSSION, FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND COMMENDATIONS

Discussion

We first met with all department heads and other administrative staff, along with the captains and warden. After a question and answer session we went into the secure facility.

Our first stop was the Plaza. There were some renovations going on and inmates were helping with the cement work. There was also an inmate painting a mural on the wall. The Canteen and clothing distribution, along with the chapel and Behavioral Health, are accessed from the Plaza. A building that stands in the middle of the Plaza serves as the center of operations for the prison's secure facilities.

From the Plaza, we passed through a gate into the "A" yard, which is also known as the "Level I Yard." The A yard is comprised of dorms that house thirty-two inmates each. Each dorm has a small day room with a television, sixteen double bunks, toilets and showers. Inmates are free to come and go during open yard hours. The dorms are interconnected to form sections, a, b, and c (also known as a 270 design.) There is an upper and lower tier.

An inmate's placement onto a Level I, II, III, or IV facility depends on various case and custodial factors. The following is a basic breakdown for the facilities (Levels I-III) provided by the Sierra Conservation Center¹:

Inmate Placement.

Each inmate shall be assigned to a facility with a security level which corresponds to the following placement score ranges:

- (1) An inmate with a placement score of 0 through 18 shall be placed in a Level I facility.
- (2) An inmate with a placement score of 19 through 35 shall be placed in a Level II facility.
- (3) An inmate with a placement score of 36 through 59 shall be placed in a Level III facility.

¹California Code of Regulations (CCR), Title 15, Crime Prevention and Corrections. Division 3, Rules and Regulations of Adult Institutions, Programs, and Parole - Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (Updated through June 1, 2023).

All are designated as Non-Designated Programming Facilities (NDPF), which means general population inmates and prior sensitive needs yard inmates are assigned and live together regardless of prior designations.

Below is a breakdown of the security level, physical design and security as provided by the Sierra Conservation Center²:

Each camp, facility, or area of a facility complex shall be designated at a security level based on its physical security and housing capability. Reception centers are not facilities of assignment and are exempt from the security level designations except for the assignment of permanent work crew inmates. The security levels are:

(a) Level I facilities and camps consist primarily of open dormitories with a low security perimeter.

(b) Level II facilities consist primarily of open dormitories with a secure perimeter, which may include armed coverage.

(c) Level III facilities primarily have a secure perimeter with armed coverage and housing units with cells adjacent to exterior walls.

(d) Level IV facilities have a secure perimeter with internal and external armed coverage and housing units described in Section 3377(c), or cellblock housing with cells non-adjacent to exterior walls. A Level IV 180-design facility utilizes housing units comprised of two wings; each wing is partitioned into three self-contained "pods", each "pod" has its own dayroom and control room. Each wing is linked by a dining facility and ancillary functions. The design of the housing unit allows a 180-degree view of all cells and dayrooms from the control room. A Level IV 270-design facility utilizes housing units comprised of three connected sections and one dayroom. Portions of first and third sections extend back behind the blind side of the control room. The design of the housing unit places cells within a 270-degree circumference of a circle with the control room in the center of the circle.

Towers are strategically placed around the yard and are manned by armed officers/guards. No lethal weapons are carried on the yards. Officers only carry Oleoresin capsicum (OC) or "pepper spray," a baton, and handcuffs.

The A and B yards are nearly identical except inverted. They are separated by an administrative building that houses the culinary, medical and education services. The B yard houses the level 2 inmates.

Many level 1, and some level 2, inmates are eligible to join the firefighting training programs. Inmates can also get their GED, learn vocational trades: body/fender, auto mechanics, welding, masonry, carpentry, office services, electronics, and building maintenance. The Prison Industry Authority (PIA) teaches sewing. There are self-help groups and substance abuse disorder treatments. A relatively new program allows

² California Code of Regulations (CCR), Title 15, Crime Prevention and Corrections. Division 3, Rules and Regulations of Adult Institutions, Programs, and Parole - Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (Updated through June 1, 2023).

inmates who qualify to keep and train dogs. The dog program is conducted in partnership with Friends of the Animal Community (FOAC), a local volunteer group.

We visited several stations that handle the daily needs of the inmates. In addition to the kitchens and dining areas and the medical services areas, we toured the library, clothing distribution, education buildings, the Chapel, and the substance abuse counseling office.

Once our tour of the A & B yard was completed, we left that secured area and walked over to the C yard; level 3 prison population. We went through the security building into the secure facility. Level 3 prisoners require different housing. There are five separate buildings around the yard. Each building has cells that typically house two inmates each. Building 2 houses inmates that are segregated from the rest of the population for a variety of reasons. Building 3 is currently utilized as a Covid-19 segregation unit. The other buildings house those considered general population inmates. The prison was quiet and there were no incidents during our tour.

During our initial meeting with staff, we learned about all the services that the prison provides. The staff we interviewed would like the public to know that the prison is in need of both employees and volunteers for programs and services. The prison does outreach to the public to acquire personnel. Staff also wants the public to know that the prison does more than just house inmates. Rehabilitation of the incarcerated is part of their mission and one of their main concerns. All programs are meant to help the inmate rehabilitate himself into a productive member of society and abstain from criminal activity.

Sierra Conservation Center Staff have programs that raise money for local community needs, such as aid to fire victims. Inmates also raise money for charities.

Findings

- F6.** The staff was friendly, professional, articulate, and knowledgeable.
- F7.** We learned that the prison is fully staffed with correctional personnel but there are shortages in staffing for many of the other departments, such as, medical, education, and all other rehabilitation services offered to the prisoners.
- F8.** There are a tremendous number of services and opportunities available that benefit staff, the incarcerated, and the public at large.

Recommendations

- R3.** Share successes and positive programs with the local press so that they may help the public stay aware of the benefits and effectiveness of the programs.

Commendations

- C3.** The Grand Jury greatly appreciated your open discussion and level of transparency and the detailed and lengthy tour you hosted. We were also impressed by the cleanliness of the facilities and yards.

REQUESTED RESPONSES

Required Responses

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933(c), responses are required from the following governing body within ninety (90) days:

- Board of Supervisors: Findings F1-F5 and Recommendations R1-R2;

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933(c) responses are required from the following elected official within sixty (60) days:

- Sheriff-Coroner: Findings F1-F5 and Recommendations R1-R2;

Invited Responses

Although not required under Penal Code section 933(c), the following responses are Invited within sixty (60) days:

- Chief Probation Officer: Findings F4-F5
- Tuolumne County Administrator Findings: F1-F5 and Recommendations R1-R2
- Public Information Officer, Sierra Conservation Center Findings F6-F8 and Recommendations R3