

THE JUVENILE DETENTION CENTER

Summary

For more than a decade every Grand Jury has reported that the Juvenile Detention Facility located on Epperly Way in Auburn was old, inadequate, over crowded, unsafe and in need of replacement. At long last, this 30-year-old facility has been closed, replaced by a state-of-the-art Juvenile Detention Center at DeWitt Center.

The citizens of Placer County can be pleased with the new 75-bed facility, which opened March 2000. The 37,000 square foot building includes secure rooms, a health facility, a dining area, lounges, classrooms, and counseling areas, all in pleasant surroundings. A fully equipped courtroom has been located within the facility, eliminating the need to transport juveniles for court appearances. In addition, there is a 6,000 square foot covered recreation area and a secure yard area. Food is centrally prepared in the Probation Department kitchen at the nearby Main Jail, contributing to the overall efficiency. The entire facility is monitored and controlled by a centralized electronic system, which greatly improves the safety of juveniles and Probation Department personnel.

The 1999-2000 Grand Jury inspected the new facility shortly after its opening. Although some work was still in progress, the Grand Jury was generally pleased and commends the Probation Department and the Board of Supervisors for this long overdue facility.

The Grand Jury was concerned, however, that some unnecessary hazards remain. Specifically, doors to the outside must be individually unlocked with a key, rather than electronically from a central location. This could present a problem if an emergency requires a quick evacuation. There are exposed grates on the ceilings. Also, razor wire is missing from parts of the perimeter fencing, which could ease escape.

The Grand Jury was also concerned about aspects of the construction that could provide opportunities for juveniles to harm themselves. These include exposed railings, ceiling grates, and ceiling alarm housings. In addition, the wheelchair lift has easily accessed electrical components.

Discussion

For thirty years, Placer County has operated a 35-bed juvenile detention facility on Epperly Way in Auburn. At the time of its construction, the county population was about 77,300; it is now over 200,000. There are many more juvenile offenders today than in 1970, and their increased sophistication has led to heightened security requirements which the facility cannot provide.

For about ten years, Grand Juries have urged the County to replace this now antiquated, overcrowded, and increasingly unsafe facility. Finally, in March 2000, it has happened. Epperly Way is closed, and the County has a new state-of-the-art juvenile detention facility in DeWitt Center.

The Grand Jury toured the new facility and was generally pleased and impressed. Costing over \$10 million, it has beds for 75 juveniles, including a subset of special rooms for higher risk individuals. With 37,000 square feet of floor space, the facility includes a health center, dining areas, classrooms, quiet reading areas, booking rooms, and counseling rooms. There is a 6,000 square foot covered recreation area equipped for basketball, volleyball, and physical training, plus secure yards. At the time of the inspection, the yard areas were not being used because of gaps in the razor wire fencing.

The new facility is far more efficient than the one it replaced. All areas are monitored centrally from a secure control room. Video tape recorders can be easily activated to record problems. Most interior doors can be locked or unlocked electronically from the control room, although doors to the outside must be individually unlocked with keys. Meals are prepared under Probation Department supervision in the nearby Main Jail. The facility includes its own courtroom, eliminating the need to transport juveniles for court appearances.

The facility meets all state and federal requirements including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

From time to time juveniles in detention attempt to harm themselves and many precautions have been taken to reduce that risk. Some concerns remain. In the ceiling of each cell are a ventilation grate and a smoke/fire detector with a protective housing. The Grand Jury feels that these could be used by individuals intent on harming themselves. Also, in some areas open stair railings could present a similar risk. The Grand Jury also noticed accessible electrical parts on the handicap lift.

Finding 1

The old facility is now closed, as long recommended by Grand Juries. The Board of Supervisors and the Probation Department are commended for the closure, and the opening of the state-of-the-art new facility.

Recommendation 1

None

Finding 2

External doors in the new facility must be unlocked manually and individually. This could be a problem in case of a fire or similar emergency.

Recommendation 2

Provide a means of electronically controlling outer doors from a secure central location.

Finding 3

Aspects of the construction may allow juveniles to harm themselves. There are exposed grates on the ceilings. Stairways have open railings. The handicapped lift has an easily accessed electrical control panel.

Recommendation 3

Find ways to reduce these risks.

Finding 4

Fencing around the facility is lacking razor wire in two locations. This may allow inmates to escape.

Recommendation 4

Install razor wire where it is missing.

Respondent

Placer County Chief Probation Officer

RESPONSE REQUIRED WITHIN 90 DAYS TO:

The Honorable Larry D. Gaddis
Presiding Judge, Superior Court
County of Placer
Historic Courthouse
101 Maple Street
Auburn, CA 95603