

LEWISBURG

'Worst inmates' to transfer out of penitentiary this year

John Beauge For PennLive

The mission of the Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary is about to change after nearly a decade of housing the worst of the worst inmates who have created problems in other prisons.

The U.S. Bureau of Prisons has announced it is transferring the special management unit from Lewisburg to a high-security prison in Thomson, Illinois.

The first transfers are expected to take place late this year.

Special management inmates are locked in their cells 23 hours a day, eat their meals there and are escorted to recreation pens.

The new mission has not been determined for Lewisburg, a high-security prison that opened in 1932, the BOP says.

The penitentiary houses about 950 inmates behind the wall with about 485 others in a satellite minimum-security camp.

A bureau news release said Lewisburg will remain open but also said it will work with current staff of 500 to ensure they have job



The special management unit from Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary, above, will be moved to a high-security prison in Thomson, Illinois. John Beauge, For PennLive

opportunities either there or at another facility.

Attempts to obtain an explanation from the prison bureau were unsuccessful. About 350 additional staff will be needed at Thomson, its release states.

Andrew Kline, president of Local 148 of the American Federation of Government Employees that represents the unionized corrections officers at Lewisburg, said Monday he does not know anything more than

what the prison bureau has announced.

Bittersweet is the reaction of the Lewisburg Prison Project to the decision to move the SMU out of Lewisburg.

Moving it is a good thing, but paralegal David Sprout said the prisoner rights organization had hoped the program would be eliminated entirely.

There are several federal lawsuits pending over the alleged treatment of SMU inmates including claims

disruptive ones are kept in restraints for extended periods.

"It's been a long struggle to hold them [Bureau of Prisons] accountable," Sprout said. Moving the program to a new facility will give the prison bureau the opportunity to start anew, he said.

He believes many of the problems at Lewisburg have stemmed from the Big House culture in addition to having cells too small to accommodate two inmates 23 hours a day and a lack of air conditioning.

Lewisburg, originally named the U.S. Northeastern Penitentiary, was the first federal prison planned, designed and constructed after the bureau was established.

The Big House, as it is commonly known, was designed in the Italian Renaissance style.

It has housed a number of famous inmates including Jimmy Hoffa, Al Capone, John Gotti, Alger Hill, Ralph Ginsburg, 1992 World Trade Center bombers and four Osama bin Laden disciples.