Monitoring Tour of Big Muddy River Correctional Center
July 28, 2010

Summary: Aging sex offenders, a medical staffing problem, far too crowded, but still holding it together.

On July 28, 2010 four representatives of the John Howard Association conducted a monitoring tour of Big Muddy River Correctional Center. Big Muddy is a medium security prison located 290 miles south and west of Chicago. The prison houses 1,850 inmates, about half of them sex offenders as well as a unique group of individuals designated as Sexually Dangerous Persons.

The JHA representatives found problems generic to nearly all prisons operated by the Illinois Department of Corrections. The prison is crowded far past its design capacity. For more than two years an essential medical position has sat vacant. There are not enough educational and vocational training programs for inmates.

Nevertheless, Warden John Evans and other prison management appear to cope with these and other issues as well as can be hoped. The warden seems intent on fixing problems and improving conditions.

The remainder of this report will review the problems and accomplishments at Big Muddy and offer observations and recommendations.
Too Crowded

Big Muddy opened in 1993. It was designed to house 952 inmates, one to a cell. In recent weeks the prison population has been 1,850 inmates, nearly all housed two to a cell.

Housing inmates two to a cell has undesirable consequences.

It increases the workload for Correctional Officers and other prison staff. It can lead to conflict between inmates. It means that dayrooms, the infirmary, dining area and other facilities must serve many more people than called for in their design.

Big Muddy is overcrowded for the same reason as other Illinois prisons.

Longer sentences mandated in the 1980s and 1990s mean people remain in prison longer than in the past. The elimination of some early release programs at the beginning of this year has caused prison populations to spike to the highest number in state history.

Big Muddy is soon to become more crowded.

About 45 disabled inmates have until now been housed alone in cells large enough to accommodate a wheelchair. Plans call for those cells to be equipped with an upper bunk so as to house two inmates rather than one.

Big Muddy houses most disciplinary segregation inmates two to a cell. This is not a good practice as inmates in disciplinary segregation are by definition disruptive and should be confined one to a cell.

Despite the overcrowding, prison management appears to have good control of its population. Big Muddy has locked down, meaning inmates are confined to their cells while staff resolves a serious problem, just six days this year. That is a very low incidence of lockdown compared to most Illinois prisons.

OBSERVATION: There is almost nothing Big Muddy prison management can do about overcrowding. The Illinois Department of Corrections has very limited options in dealing with overcrowding. Only the governor and state legislature can resolve the problem.
No Medical Director

Big Muddy has had no Medical Director since the beginning of 2008. This key position should never be left vacant for any significant length of time.

A prison Medical Director is a physician who oversees other doctors, the infirmary, clinical care, quality assurance and other vital medical functions.

The state has outsourced Big Muddy’s Medical Director position to Wexford Health Services. Prison management said Wexford has so far been unable to fill the position, although a Wexford physician provides some Medical Director services on a part-time basis.

Almost no Sexually Dangerous Persons are ever released from prison. As a result, they are an aging and increasingly frail population. Such individuals require increased medical care, of course, which emphasizes the need for a full-time, permanent Medical Director.

Big Muddy’s medical unit has a capacity of 18 and, because of the prison’s overcrowding, is usually filled to capacity.

Prison management said that for four or five days a month, no physician is on premises. Big Muddy’s roster of registered nurses and other essential personnel appear to be fully staffed, which is not the case in many prisons. A registered nurse is on premises every hour of the year.

The mental health staff also appears to be staffed according to department authorization. This is important in that Big Muddy must provide psychiatric care to 408 inmates and administer psychotropic medication to 335 inmates. No inmates were involuntarily receiving psychotropic medication at the time of the JHA inspection.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Wexford Health Sources should be required to fulfill its responsibility to provide Big Muddy with a full-time, permanent Medical Director.
Sex Offenders and Sexually Dangerous Persons

Big Muddy is home to approximately 900 sex offender inmates, and a related but separate group of approximately 160 individuals judged by the courts to be Sexually Dangerous Persons.

A Sexually Dangerous Person is an individual with a mental disorder who is believed to pose a substantial threat of committing a sexual offense if allowed to remain free. They are confined under civil, not criminal, law.

An individual designated as Sexually Dangerous is released after extensive evaluation determines he is no longer a threat. This rarely occurs and most individuals confined as a Sexually Dangerous Person will remain in prison for the rest of their lives.

Prison medical staff said pedophiles and rapists constitute the majority of Big Muddy’s sex offenders and Sexually Dangerous Persons. As many as 25 inmates are psychotic, chronic pedophiles.

While they are technically not inmates sentenced for a crime, an individual classified as a Sexually Dangerous Person lives much like any other inmate at Big Muddy. He wears the same uniform as a sentenced inmate, has the same access (or lack of access) to educational and vocational programs, and orders items from the same commissary.

If a Sexually Dangerous Person violates prison rules or commits an offense, he loses some privileges and is sent to a Disciplinary Segregation cell, the same punishment meted out to a convicted inmate.

The housing area for Sexually Dangerous Persons is not noticeably different from that of other medium security prisons. The dayroom, for example, is institutionally drab, crowded and in the summer, almost unendurably hot.

Sexually Dangerous Persons are allowed more time out of cell than other inmates at Big Muddy.
The main treatment for Sexually Dangerous Persons is 12 hours of group therapy a week. Group therapy is also available to “ordinary” sex offenders who volunteer for it.

Sex offenders and Sexually Dangerous Persons who qualify are part of what is called a Therapeutic Community. The Therapeutic Community is structured and supervised by staff but run by its participants. The Therapeutic Community has some aspects of self-government. For example, a chairman is elected at 90 day intervals and there are committees to deal with various issues of treatment.

A few people complained that they are taunted by Correctional Officers.

Some individuals involved in group therapy spoke highly of their progress. One person, who said he is a pedophile, estimated that group therapy had reduced the likelihood of him re-offending from as high as 70 percent to as low as 5 percent.

“I’ve matured more in the last two years than in the previous 30,” he said. He also said he does not expect to ever be released from prison.

His belief that he will remain in prison until he dies is realistic. In the last three years, only two formerly designated Sexually Dangerous Persons were determined to no longer pose a hazard and released from Big Muddy.

**OBSERVATION:** Effective rehabilitation of dangerous sex offenders, whether confined in prison by civil or criminal statute, remains elusive. Experts differ on what is appropriate treatment. Many mental health professionals, rightly or wrongly, believe there is no cure for individuals with pathological sexual behavior. Accordingly, JHA has no opinion on the rehabilitative treatment of sexual offenders and Sexually Dangerous Persons at Big Muddy.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The environment of Sexually Dangerous Persons should be made less sterile, but without compromising security. This could be accomplished by minor changes such as a brighter paint scheme, allowing individuals to wear street clothing and permitting posters and other artwork and décor in cells and living areas.
Educational, Vocational and Rehabilitative Programs

Because resources are limited, some managers in the Illinois Department of Corrections believe there is no reason to offer educational, vocational and rehabilitative programs to inmates who have many years to serve or will never leave prison. Those managers say inmates who will be returning to society should have first priority in access to programming.

Warden Evans holds a different philosophy. He believes all inmates should have access to educational, vocational and rehabilitative programs no matter the length of their sentence.

“In rehabilitative terms, programs are good for the inmate,” Warden Evans said. “They learn about themselves. They change.”

The John Howard Association holds the same view. All inmates should have equal access to educational, vocational and rehabilitative programs without regard to the length of their sentence.

Extensive research indicates that inmates who receive education or participate in rehabilitative programs are better behaved while in prison, and vastly less likely to commit a new offense if released into society. (For details, see the recent JHA Special Report on Education at [http://www.thejha.org/education](http://www.thejha.org/education)).

Big Muddy encourages inmate participation in programs. On entry to the prison, new inmates meet with an assistant warden who informs them in detail of available programs. Peer inmates are also available to advise new inmates about programs and services. Big Muddy inmates proposed the idea of peer inmates and prison management accepted their suggestion.

Big Muddy is authorized for six Adult Basic Education teachers, but for more than two years has had only three. Currently 104 inmates are taking Adult Basic Education classes. An estimated 300 inmates would take the classes if they were available, prison educators said.

Currently 138 inmates are enrolled in GED classes and just 13 are on a waiting list.
Big Muddy offers vocational training in culinary arts, constructions skills, automotive repair and horticulture. At any given time, 64 inmates are in vocational training. The average waiting time to get into a class is approximately nine months.

The horticulture class has planted attractive flower beds on the grounds of the prison, which softens the institutional environment. For example, the American flag is set out in vivid colors in one prominently located flower bed.

Warden Evans said he hopes to add commercial custodial and other vocational classes. Prison management is also working to increase its reentry programming.

Big Muddy’s attractive, well-organized library deserves special mention.

According to librarian Jennifer Wilson, the library contains 30,000 books, far more than the typical prison. She said the books mainly come from donations.

“I have not purchased a general library book in 11 years,” Wilson said, as the state stopped funding such purchases long ago.

The library’s collection of general reading is varied, with books for inexpert readers to those suitable for inmates with college level literacy.

The law library has four trained clerks familiar with the law relating to Sexually Dangerous Persons and able to help those persons seeking court relief. Wilson said that in all, she has a staff of eight. This is considerably more than most prisons in the state.

**OBSERVATION:** Big Muddy’s prison management appears intent on offering as much programming to as many inmates as possible, but this ambition is frustrated by lack of resources. The state should fill the three vacant Adult Basic Education teacher positions. Big Muddy’s library is excellent and warrants study of its best practices for application at other prisons.
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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 that are instrumental in improving prison conditions.

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