Monitoring Tour of Dixon Correctional Center
June 22, 2010

**Summary: A prison for the ill, a nursing home for the future?**

On June 22, 2010, a group of John Howard Association staff and volunteers conducted a monitoring tour of Dixon Correctional Center, a medium security prison.

Dixon is a specialized prison. Its inmates include men with physical disabilities, chronic medical problems, developmental disabilities, and mental illness. The prison has a special unit for maximum security inmates suffering from severe psychiatric problems. Dixon also houses general population inmates.

This report focuses mainly on Dixon inmates with disabilities, both mental and physical, and geriatric inmates in particular.

Dixon houses, like other prisons around the country, an increasing number of geriatric inmates. Many involved in corrections believe that a long prison term adds approximately a decade to an inmate’s chronological age. For this reason, inmates 55 and older are often considered geriatric, although they may not need special care.

“We are getting an older and more frail population,” said Dr. Imhotep Carter, Medical Director of Dixon. He and other medical personnel said the Illinois Department of Corrections needs a secure nursing home for geriatric inmates and Dixon would be the logical location.

Dr. Carter said that at least 100 of Dixon’s inmates should be cared for in a nursing home on the prison’s premises. As it stands now, he said, older inmates
are sent to his infirmary when their medical conditions become acute, and are then returned to their cells when their medical issues improve.

“I’m constantly recycling them from the infirmary to their housing unit,” Dr. Carter said.

According to Bureau of Justice Statistics, the US state and federal geriatric prison population swelled from 43,300 inmates in 1999 to 76,600 inmates in 2007, an increase of 77 percent.

The increase in geriatric inmates in Illinois and around the country is mainly due to longer sentences handed down beginning in the 1980s and continuing today. Parole for serious offenses such as murder and rape has been nearly eliminated. Extremely long sentences, such as 60 years, are also more common, meaning more inmates remain incarcerated into old age.

In 2009, the Illinois Department of Corrections housed 2,355 inmates over age 55.

This represents a 51 percent increase in the number of geriatric prisoners since 2005. Barring a change in sentencing policy or the reinstitution of parole, there is no reason to believe this trend will abate.

Dixon offers adult care services to 28 inmates. The care is provided by 31 inmate volunteers supervised by a social worker. This would seem to be an effective use of inmate labor to assist other inmates in need.

Overall Dixon’s staff appears intent on providing humane and appropriate care. Inmates privately interviewed by JHA representatives had relatively few complaints about their care and several spoke highly of their medical and psychiatric caregivers.

However, a nursing home unit at Dixon would provide more humane and appropriate care than that available in a typical cellhouse. It would also increase efficiency in providing services to geriatric inmates while freeing space in the infirmary for inmates with more serious medical problems.

The John Howard Association recommends that the Illinois Department of Corrections begin planning now for a secure nursing home for geriatric inmates.
Specialized Units

As noted earlier, Dixon hosts several specialized units. Dixon receives inmates needing special care from other prisons. Following is a summary of conditions observed by JHA.

The Special Treatment Center (STC) houses 487 inmates who are mentally ill, developmentally disabled, autistic or suffering from similar acute or chronic disorders. They are incapacitated to the point that they cannot be housed in general population. In appearance, housing units and cells resemble those of the typical medium security prison. Inmates are able to open windows in their cells, have access to a day room and washers and dryers.

One goal is to treat inmates in STC so that they can meet the requirements of daily living. Another goal is to stabilize some individuals so that they can be returned to general population.

The Dixon Psychiatric Unit (DPU) is a maximum security unit for inmates with severe psychiatric problems and provides a low stimulus environment. Inmates are able to open the barred windows of their cells, but are subject to the more intense security regime typical of a maximum security unit and lack some of the amenities of the STC. The unit houses 210 inmates, each with his own cell.

Altogether the two units have a capacity to house 730 inmates.

Larry Weiner, Psychologist Administrator at Dixon, said that all types of mental health disorders may be found in the prison’s population, with schizophrenia the most common.

Programs are significantly more limited for DPU inmates than for STC inmates. Inmates in DPU are allowed to take Adult Basic Education and GED classes and very little else. This is standard practice for maximum security inmates.

Eight STC inmates are enrolled in laundry/dry cleaning training, 5 in building maintenance and 11 in Job Preparation. Those programs are not available to DPU inmates.
Waiting lists are short or nonexistent for Adult Basic Education and GED classes. Last year 1 DPU and 5 STC inmates obtained their GED.

Another prison wing houses medium security inmates who use wheelchairs or have other mobility problems. Although their day room is small, it is equipped with a pool table. This indicates that prison management has confidence in the security of the unit, as pool balls and cues are potential weapons and are rarely seen in prisons. The unit also has its own weight room.

All inmates have access to a large law library. Three legal texts chosen at random were published in 1995, 2007 and 2010, an indication that legal resources are up to date.

Inmates also have access to a large standard library. The library carries fiction and non-fiction books suitable for differing reading abilities. There was a selection of large typeface books for individuals with impaired vision. There was also a section devoted to newspapers and periodicals of general interest.

Prison management said a literacy program serving 30 inmates at a time had been suspended in May. They said they were hoping to resume the program in August.

**Medical Care**

Dixon’s medical unit is reasonably well staffed in comparison to some other Illinois prisons.

The most notable shortage is in nursing. Dixon is authorized for 1,400 hours of nursing per week, but is actually receiving 1,200 hours. Dixon does receive all or nearly all of its on-site authorized service from 2 doctors, 2 dentists, 7 psychologists, 2 social workers and 6 psychiatrists.

A nurse with years of experience at Dixon said the average nurse now works about 30 hours of overtime a month. Overtime was much higher in the past, the nurse said.
The infirmary has a capacity for 16 patient/inmates. A JHA Citizen Observer, a practicing physician, examined the infirmary and said that it appeared more than adequate. Overall she said she was impressed by the range of care provided at Dixon.

Medical staff said the infirmary sometimes exceeds its capacity. They also said care would be enhanced if more medical specialists were available to treat inmates.

**Inmate and Staff Interaction**

Dixon staff and inmates appear to interact comfortably and without tension.

Inmates greeted Warden Nedra Chandler politely and she returned their greetings by name. The same was true of other staff.

Warden Chandler has worked at Dixon for approximately 25 years, beginning as a Correctional Officer, serving in other capacities such as Counselor, and advancing over time to her current position. Not surprisingly, she has a complete understanding of the prison and its population.

During the tour, one inmate assaulted another, inflicting visible head injuries. Medical staff decided to hold the injured inmate in the infirmary for observation. The inmate became disruptive and began shouting and kicking the door of his observation cell.

In a business like tone, Warden Chandler instructed the inmate to calm down. She explained that he was under observation for his own good and would be returned to his housing unit when medical staff had completed their observation.

The inmate sat down and, at least for a time, was quiet.
Other Facts and Observations

Dixon has a total population of 2,229 inmates and a capacity for 2,418. Of these, 1,647 are in general population (all numbers fluctuate frequently.)

Altogether 825 inmates (a figure which includes general population inmates) are receiving psychiatric care, 717 are receiving psychotropic medication, 114 of them involuntarily.

Inmates are employed in prison industry providing prescription glasses for the Illinois Department of Corrections and other state agencies.

The average inmate is 42 years old. By way of comparison, the average Illinois prison inmate is 35 years old.

Group therapy is available for sex offenders.

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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.