



John Howard Association of Illinois

300 West Adams Street, Suite 423 Chicago, IL 60606
Tel. 312-782-1901 Fax. 312-782-1902 www.john-howard.org

Monitoring Tour of Dwight Correctional Center January 26, 2010

SUMMARY: Significant problems exist in psychiatric care

On Jan. 26 a group of six John Howard Association board members, staff and volunteers conducted a monitoring tour of Dwight Correctional Center, the main prison for women in Illinois. Dwight is also the reception and classification center for all women entering the state prison system. Reception and classification is a key intake process in which inmates are given physical and mental evaluations and other diagnostic services.

Discussions and interviews with inmates, senior staff on site and the top medical officer for the Illinois Department of Corrections revealed a significant problem.

Inmates in the reception and classification center are waiting for weeks or months to see a psychiatrist and are deprived of needed psychotropic medication during that time. Ordinarily a psychiatric evaluation is one of the first procedures completed when a person enters prison.

Warden Carolyn Trancoso said the prison is currently authorized for 40 hours of on-site psychiatry each week. Another 20 hours a week of care is provided via telepsychiatry.

But Trancoso said that since the summer of 2009, Dwight has had the services of a psychiatrist for just 20 hours a week and 20 hours of telepsychiatry. Psychiatric services are provided by a private company, Wexford Health Sources. Wexford did not respond to a request for comment.

Trancoso and other ranking prison officials acknowledged that there are troublesome delays in providing psychiatric treatment and psychotropic medication. They said it is mainly due to the fact that the prison does not have a psychiatrist on site 40 hours a week.

The reception and classification process is also taking longer to complete as Dwight is receiving a higher than normal number of new inmates. This is the result of a recent state clampdown on early release of inmates. (See section Population and Physical Plant below.)

The JHA group interviewed several dozen inmates at Dwight. Five inmates had remarkably similar complaints about their psychiatric care. They said they had been in the reception and classification center for as long as 10 weeks without seeing a psychiatrist and were without

psychotropic medication. Others were not permitted to take medication prescribed for them when they were confined at other institutions prior to Dwight.

(JHA provided the names of the inmates to the warden, the medical director of the prison and the chief medical director of IDOC the day following the inspection. All three responded promptly saying they would investigate medical problems among inmates interviewed by JHA.)

The shortage of psychiatric care potentially affects a large number of people.

Psychiatric treatment is provided on-site to 219 inmates and approximately 160 are served by telepsychiatry. Roughly 18% to 20% of the inmate population is receiving psychotropic medication. Recently 10 inmates were involuntarily receiving psychotropic medication.

Dr. Louis Shicker, the top medical officer at IDOC, said he is aware of the delays in psychiatric care and is working to end them.

He said he is coordinating with the Cook County Department of Corrections to obtain medication records of inmates as they are transferred from the jail to Dwight. This would reduce or end the delay in providing medication during reception and classification.

Shicker said he is also making progress in obtaining more hours of psychiatric care at Dwight.

“These hours will be specifically used for intake evaluations,” Shicker said in an e-mail. “The psychiatrist will then be able to place the new (inmates) on the appropriate medication.”

The long delays in psychiatric treatment are unacceptable and pose a threat to the health and safety of inmates.

The John Howard Association is pleased, however, that IDOC and Warden Trancoso are attempting to resolve the problem of delayed psychiatric care, and will monitor their progress in coming months.

Other Observations

Sexual Misconduct

In 2008 news reports disclosed that a Dwight inmate said she had been raped numerous times by at least seven guards and had conceived a child while in the prison. Another inmate said a male correctional officer had observed her undergo a gynecological examination and later made sexual advances towards her.

Trancoso, who became warden well after the time of the alleged offenses, said a number of steps have been taken to prevent sexual conduct or other prohibited behavior.

For example, 200 video cameras have been installed throughout the prison and more are planned. While not monitored, the video of each camera is preserved for nearly a year to assist investigators should complaints arise of sexual abuse.

Inmates are also provided with names of ranking prison officials who they may contact confidentially should they wish to complain of abuse. The names and contact information are posted prominently throughout the prison.

Inmate Programs and Privileges

As noted earlier, inmates are spending more time in reception and classification than in the past. Inmates in reception and classification were severely limited in the visits they could receive and the phone calls they could make. Trancoso said she is easing those limits. She also said she would like to extend visiting hours for inmates in the general population, provide them with more time outdoors and increase recreational opportunities.

Prison management holds quarterly quality of life meetings with inmates to discuss ways of improving programs and services.

One change planned is an increase in the variety of commissary items offered to inmates.

A review of commissary prices showed them to be in line with ordinary retail prices or cheaper. A beef and cheese stick snack is 67 cents, for example, while a 30-pack of dental floss loops is \$2.02.

Unfortunately, there is no room at Dwight to expand prison industries and the highly coveted jobs and income they provide for inmates. The prison's sewing services and highly regarded service dog training program employ just 66 people. The instructor position for the service dog training program has been vacant for three months. Dwight officials are concerned the program might be cancelled if the position is not filled soon.

Dwight offered vocational training in cosmetology until August 2008. The instructor position has been vacant since that time and the program is currently suspended.

Population and Physical Plant

Trancoso said that Dwight has a current capacity of 1,209 inmates. A week before the JHA tour the population was at 1,137, although this number fluctuates constantly. About half of the inmates are double celled.

The state has recently curtailed early release programs that had been intended to reduce prison crowding and cut expenses. Trancoso said the early release programs had lowered the number of inmates at Dwight by several hundred which significantly benefited the institution.

She also said that the number of inmates will increase. This is almost certain to lead to crowded conditions. On one recent day, only four inmate beds were available.

Dwight dates to 1930, with buildings added over the ensuing years. Most inmates reside in "cottages" – freestanding buildings with cells and a common area – that date to the opening of the facility.

Trancoso said the cottages need \$80,000 in roofing repairs as a prelude to more extensive interior renovation such as repairing plaster and painting. She said she hopes to complete the roofing work soon.

Representatives from JHA inspected the mental health unit, infirmary, disciplinary segregation unit, drug treatment facility and mess hall. Although some areas showed signs of wear, all facilities were clean and orderly.

Trancoso said that a year ago Dwight had 60 to 70 uninhabitable cells. That has been reduced to about a dozen.

Although definitely a prison, Dwight does not seem as grim and institutional as some. Facilities are generally painted light and pleasant colors. Inmates and staff were relaxed and appeared to interact well.

Miscellaneous Facts

The average inmate is 36 years old. Approximately 63 percent of inmates have five years or less to serve on their sentence.

Substance abuse treatment is provided to 142 inmates and five more are on a waiting list. Anger management classes have 18 inmates enrolled and 20 on a waiting list.

There is no formal treatment program for inmates who are convicted sex offenders, however.

Instructors offer GED classes to 39 inmates and Adult Basic Education to 70 inmates. Another 77 inmates are taking college classes. Last year 75 inmates obtained their GED. There is no waiting list for any of the educational programs.