A Look Inside the Mackinac County Jail: Inmates Have Few Choices in Daily Routine

Many Say Serving Time in Small Jails Is Harder Than Prison

By Karen Gould

Daily fresh-baked cookies are about the only reminder of home for inmates at the Mackinac County Jail. Once inmates step inside a jail cell and steel doors are shut and locked, their lives are changed forever.

"For somebody who's never been in jail before, it's a shock," said Chief Corrections Deputy Tim Ahlborn, who serves as the jail administrator and has 22 years of experience at the facility in St. Ignace.

Rooms are small, every door has a lock, and there are no views of the outside.

In a tiny room down the hall from the jail cells, a thick glass window is smudged with fingerprints, left by an inmate's efforts to touch a family member during a recent visit. Each inmate is allowed 20 minutes a week for the non-contact visit. Viewing family through the thick glass is as close as an inmate will get, until time is served.

The jail can hold 28 prisoners, and those held inside may be charged with a misdemeanor or a felony or be serving time for conviction of a crime. The jail also houses inmates from overcrowded facilities throughout Michigan.

"We have to operate the jail as a maximum security facility," said Sheriff Scott Strait, "because everybody that ends up in prison from Mackinac County starts here."

Prisoners have little control over their lives, said Mr. Ahlborn. They are told when to get up, what they will eat, what they wear, who they can and cannot write to, and when they will go to bed.

"About the only choice that they really have is what to watch on the television," he said, and that is by agreement with three other cell mates.

Upon arrival at the jail, street dress is replaced with bright orange prison-issued clothing and shoes are traded for rubber flip-flops. A two-inch-thick, vinyl-covered mattress is issued at check-in, to be placed on a metal bunk bed that is bolted to the cell wall. Each cell has four beds.

A tiny slot in the door is unlocked long enough to deliver food, and in the center of the room is a steel table with attached bench seats, all welded to the floor.

The top third of the shower curtain is clear plastic, and a waste-high metal shield near the toilet provides a semblance of privacy, yet allows inmates to always be visible.

Bolted to the wall just outside cell bars, a telephone for outgoing calls only is available for a fee. The cord is barely long enough to reach an ear.

Windows are covered with heavy bars and an opaque screen, eliminating any view of the outside.

A television is viewed through cream-colored steel bars. The inmates pay for the service.

There is no privacy.

"Everything they do in the cell is watched," said Mr. Ahlborn. "They are on camera 24 hours a day."

Cameras cover every angle of a cell and monitors are watched by a corrections deputy in the security room. Periodic patrols are made of cells, as inmates are observed through the small window in the door that is in the jail's interior corridor. Inmates also are checked on from the catwalk area, which is the outer perimeter of the cell block. It contains the television and is separated from the cell by thick steel bars.

The jail stay is not free.

Prisoners must pay the county $20 a day, which includes three meals and the use of the television. The cost is reduced to $17 a day if an inmate pays the bill within 30 days.

When prisoners are first brought to the jail, they are put into a holding cell, formerly called the drunk tank, and remain there until arraignment. Personal items like including clothing are accounted for and put in storage.

After arraignment, inmates are issued bedding and clothing. About 20 years ago, prisoners remained in street clothing. Now, prison dress distinguishes inmates and serves as a means of identification if they escape.

At the Mackinac County Jail, two styles of dress are distributed, the standard orange pants and shirt and a black and white striped uniform for those performing community work.

A paperback book and a television remote control lay on the picnic table inside this empty cell at the Mackinac County Jail. They await the next group of prisoners. The television must be watched through jail bars and the telephone on the far wall, with its short cord, is usable, although not easily. It remains just outside the cell. Two of the cell's four metal bunks are visible on the right Wednesday, January 7.

Jail Administrator Deputy Tim Ahlborn unlocks a food door to one of the cells at the Mackinac County Jail. Food is delivered to prisoners through the small opening.

Inside a barred entrance at the Mackinac County Jail, cells line the hallway. Small windows in each cell door offer a restricted view for prisoners. Vents in each door provide a means of communication between deputies and inmates. The jail is rated to hold 28 prisoners.

A jail cook for eight years, Rayma Parson of Gould City (left) and kitchen supervisor Shirley Wood of St. Ignace, with 19 years of experience, prepare three meals a day, seven days a week, for county inmates. The women also bake a fresh batch of cookies each day.

Corrections Deputy Stephannie Vallier keeps a close watch on activities outside and inside the jail on monitors in the security room. Cameras are strategically placed throughout the jail. Inmates are within camera range all of the time, and offered no privacy.

Time in jail gives inmates a routine, said Mr. Ahlborn, providing some structure in their life, something they may not have had before.

Inmates are awakened by 7 a.m., breakfast arrives by 7:30 a.m., and beds are made by 9:30 a.m. Some prisoners head out to perform community service work. Those who remain in their cells watch television, play cards or games, exercise, read, write, and draw.

"It's amazing the art talent that many of these individuals have," said Mr. Ahlborn. "If they were to channel their talent from whatever they did that got them in trouble to some of the artwork they are doing. . . People are very talented and could be artists."

The jail also has two tall shelves stacked with books available for prisoners to read.

Deputy Ahlborn said some people argue that prisoners should not be allowed anything to do while in jail, including watching television, but the television has reduced fights and calmed nerves, he said.

Arraignments take place in a room that doubles for medical examinations. A camera and monitor allow the inmate to appear before the judge, eliminating the risk of transporting the inmate to the courthouse. The video arraignment program has offered more security and is working well, said Mr. Ahlborn, reducing additional staff needed if an inmate is taken out of the jail. The program also is used on Mackinac Island.

Those sentenced to a year in jail will be in the same cell and possibility with the same three other people until their sentence is completed. The jail staff treats all prisoners with respect, said Mr. Ahlborn, and staff assess prisoners, making an effort to house inmates with similar personalities and interests. Staff members look at past behavior, their age, if they've been in jail before, and the crime they committed.

The staff tries to always keep at least two people in a cell, and are very watchful of inmate behavior, said Mr. Ahlborn. Questions asked of inmates during booking seek information about mental history, including if they have ever considered suicide. Staff works with Hiawatha Behavioral Health in St. Ignace, which provides counselors when needed for inmates who are feeling stressed.

"You cannot guarantee there will not be a suicide," he said. "Because somebody who is predisposed to suicide, they're going to do it no matter how many checks you do."

He added, "If he's got that notion, whether he is in jail or at home, it's going to happen. The only thing we can do in the corrections field is just be vigilant, just keep an extra eye."

About the only time inmates are allowed to leave the cell are for doctor visits, arraignments, meetings, church service, when they have a visitor, and for cell cleanings.

Inmates are responsible for cleaning their own cells to jail standards. The jail is inspected by the Department of Corrections and must meet state standards. Some jails have bed bugs, lice, and other problems, said Sheriff Strait, but not this jail. The cleaner the jail is kept, he said, the healthier it is for the inmates.

In the winter, while the floors are drying, inmates walk the hallways. One group of cell mates is allowed out at a time, however, as soon as they can, they often return to the cell.

"It has become home," said Deputy Ahlborn. "It is secure."

In the summer, inmates are allowed to use the exercise yard. The fenced area has a security screen and cameras.

"That's a big, big plus," said Mr. Ahlborn of the outdoor trip. "They are out of the cell, they're getting fresh air, and they can see the sunlight."

In the evening, inmates have the option to attend meetings in the jail, including Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. A GED class is offered, and religious services are available.

A county jail inmate has fewer options than someone assigned to a prison. A prison offers more out-of-cell time, classes, programs, and counseling, said Mr. Ahlborn. It is not unusual for an inmate who has been to prison and is back before the judge to choose prison over the jail.

"They would rather go there because they realize county jail time is harder than prison time," he said.

The county jail, although it offers less freedom, is not a deterrent for a repeat offender who already has had jail experience and continues to choose to break the law, he said.

By midnight at the jail, it's quiet time. Those who choose to violate the period often end up being moved to the holding cell for the night. Without a bed or blanket, one night in the holding cell is all that is needed before an inmate respects quiet time.

Quiet time puts inmates on a schedule, is part of the process to develop a routine, and offers a period of rest for those on the community work program.

"The jail has got to be clean, it's got to be secure, and it's got to be quiet," said Sheriff Strait. "Those three things ensure that the inmates are safe, that the staff is safe, and most importantly, that the public is safe."

Clark Township Planning Commission

Recommendation: Prohibit Some Geothermal Systems

By Jonathan Eppley

The Clark Township Planning Commission is recommending that Clark Township prohibit open-loop geothermal energy systems. Such systems draw water from an aquifer through a supply well and return it to the aquifer after passing through a heat pump. Water in a closed-loop system, on the other hand, is contained in sealed pipes and not dumped back into the aquifer.

The Planning Commission voted to make the recommendation Tuesday, January 13.

The question of geothermal energy systems was first presented to the commission by John Shoberg at its December 9 meeting. Mr. Shoberg, who had a geothermal system installed at his home last summer, said he discovered potential concerns with open-loop systems when researching geothermal systems.

"We have no idea what the aquifers are really like around here," he said. The misuse of well water for home heating could be wasteful, he noted, and "we don't know what the recovery rate is" of area aquifers.

Commissioner Paul Smith said a problem with open-loop systems is that if multiple systems are in close proximity to one another, they can dry up an aquifer, which in turn could dry up a home's drinking water well.

"If you have four or five homes all on one street using it, you could really dry someone's drinking well," he said.

A typical open-loop system for a 2,000-square-foot home pumps four to eight gallons of water per minute out of the ground, equal to 2,880 to 5,760 gallons of water per day.

The commission is recommending closed-loop systems because they circulate water, or an antifreeze solution, through a network of sealed pipes buried in the ground and don't draw from aquifers. The pipes in a closed-loop system use the ground's temperature to keep the temperature of the fluid consistent.

The initial cost of a geothermal system is between $17,500 and $37,500, according to the California Energy Commission. Installing an open-loop system typically costs less than a closed-loop

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