

The Fifth Generation Jail: Contra Costa's West County Justice Facility

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Since opening the nation's first direct supervision county jail in 1981, Contra Costa County has hosted in excess of 8,000 professional visitors from every state in the union and from many foreign countries. The single most repeated question during these tours has been, "If you had to do it over again, what would you do differently?" Over the years, the answer to this vital question has continually changed as our

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experiences, both in Contra Costa and in other direct supervision facilities, have matured.

In the early 1980s, we initially thought that the Contra Costa Main Detention Facility (MDF) was perhaps the perfect facility. It was being proclaimed a paradigm for local corrections—a total departure from our profession's very sad past and a credible prototype for future jail facilities. At the time, we

certainly thought that we had advanced the state of architecture, philosophy, and operations to the farthest point that was both reasonable and acceptable within a local corrections environment. Therefore, in 1981 this vital question was answered, "We wouldn't do much differently. After all, we have forty-six single cells per module, steel doors, security locks, individual toilets, complete maximum security construction, excellent electronics, sufficient program spaces—all obtained within a reasonable construction budget."

Looking back, I can truthfully say that we had accepted a very limited

vision of the potential of direct supervision as it relates to **both** facility

construction and inmate management. Because we had not done an internal evaluation—and no doubt because of our natural defensiveness in response to initial criticisms of direct supervision—we erected boundaries that artificially limited what was actually possible within the philosophy of direct supervision.

Early Planning Considerations

In the mid-1980s two important events completely changed how we viewed the MDF and any potential future construction, and how we answered the vital question.

The first was that we commissioned a User-Based Evaluation of the MDF. It was a similar evaluation of the federal MCCs in Chicago, New York, and San Diego that provided vital knowledge on which the MDF was initially based. (It is a sad commentary on our profession that although we spend billions of dollars on facility construction, we are not willing to spend anything on independent evaluations, either to confirm what was successful or identify what failed.)

The user-based evaluation included interviews with all levels of staff in each job category, from administrators and deputies to custodians and clerks, inmates of every classification, the architects, construction managers, and the citizen advisory committee. The information obtained included not only what was right and good, but more importantly, what was not right and not good.

In addition, everyone interviewed was asked that important and often repeated question: "What changes would make your job more attractive

and efficient if we were to build again?" The results produced ninety-six different suggestions that had to be seriously considered if we were to avoid the mistakes of the MDF.

The second event that changed our thinking was the success of a series of state-wide jail construction bond issues, which made it apparent that Contra Costa County would receive considerable funding to construct additional facilities.

The success of our state funding application (for \$36 million, or three-fourths of an estimated \$48 million needed for the project) was based on a complete assessment of the present and future needs of the Contra Costa system into the twenty-first century. We recognized that in all probability this funding would provide the last reasonable opportunity for new facility construction in our generation. Although it certainly would have been easy to duplicate the success of the MDF, incorporating only the changes suggested by staff, this approach would not do justice to the knowledge we had gained with five years' experience.

The Benefit of Site

Initially, the county planned to locate the new facility on a portion of county-owned property that was five miles from the MDF, but the site was directly adjacent to an established residential community. Although the price was right (we owned the property), this plan was wrong. The site was too small for both present and future needs, and

the community was absolutely outraged at the prospect of a detention facility, especially a campus-style facility, in the neighborhood.

The loss of the site was a mixed blessing for the project. On the one hand, the Sheriff's Department wanted additional space for our envisioned project and future expansion, and we certainly did not wish to begin a fifty-year conflict with our neighbors. On the other hand, the necessity of purchasing an acceptable site reduced our budget for construction. This meant that we had to do extensive value engineering.

Eventually we obtained the right site for the West County Justice Facility (WCJF): fifty-eight acres in a reasonably remote location surrounded by the San Francisco Bay, a regional shoreline park, a private golf course, and a steel mill. Most importantly, we have no direct neighbors and are not threatened by residential encroachment. We also have sufficient space to expand into the foreseeable future.

One of the mistakes we made at the MDF was insisting on a central site adjacent to the courts, which limited our ability to expand at the downtown location. We found that such locations limit architectural options. It is not essential to be near the courts, either, it takes the same number of staff to drive the court bus

as it does to walk inmates across the Street.

Maximizing Existing Facilities

Before actually beginning to design the project, the department reviewed existing facilities and the inmate population to evaluate how to blend existing and proposed resources. We

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determined early on that the Richmond Work Release facility (140 beds) and the Marsh Creek Detention Facility (400 beds) would be adequate for the projected minimum-security population. The MDF with its 386 single-cell, maximum-security construction, toilets, electronics, disciplinary module, and medical and mental infirmaries would, with some renovation, be adequate for projected maximum-security inmates.

To maximize the resources of the entire system, we determined that it would be efficient system-wide and would provide substantial construction savings if the WCJF did not duplicate the MDF's disciplinary, medical, and mental health housing modules. Instead we decided to expand our capability at the existing MDF. This decision will result in an expanded "special needs" capability and a consolidated professional

staff-at substantial savings both in construction and future staff needs.

Rationale for the WCJF Design

In our review of the present inmate population, we determined that the WCJF inmate population would be approximately 75 percent unsentenced offenders, mostly unsentenced felons. The question was, "How can we efficiently and cost-effectively design for this population and still maintain the necessary security and programming features that we envisioned for the future?"

When we looked closely, we found that because of crowding, approximately 200 of the inmates projected

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to be housed in WCJF were already being classified to Marsh Creek, a dormitory facility that can best be described as minimum-security. It is surrounded only by a simple fence that has occasionally proved inadequate for the task. The rest of the inmates intended for the WCJF were on open MDF modules in crowded double-cells and bunk beds.

The questions we asked ourselves were as follows: "If you truly believe the decade-old lessons and established principles of direct supervision, then is it of any real concern

in the crowded MDF situation that inmates now leave a bunk bed and go to a remote toilet?" "When inmates are out all day, do they really need a toilet in their rooms?" "Do we need maximum security windows, doors, and module sallyports when the inmates are up and out all day?" "Do we need cinder block or concrete walls when the room doors are always open, or will laminated sheet rock fill the same function?"

Administration and Support Building

The WCJF was designed to provide all administration and facility support services outside the maximum-security fence line, which encloses thirty-five of the fifty-eight

available site acres. The administration and support building includes administration and staff facilities, central

control, inmate records, inmate receiving and booking, property, court transportation, kitchen, laundry, and maintenance shops.

The entire building is situated against a substantial berm that provides direct access to the general living units through two tunnels that run under both the perimeter patrol road and the dual fence line. This unique design facilitates staff and visitor access without the need for staff to open and close the gates that penetrate the fence line. In fact, the only penetration of the fence line

occurs at the required fire access gate, which we do not plan to use except for emergencies and periodic testing.

Other important features of the administration and support building that depart from the past are as follows:

- **Staff facilities.** The complaint most often voiced in our user-based evaluation was the absence of quality facilities for staff. "The inmates have everything and we have nothing," was the common cry. If we recognize that quality staff require quality support and facilities, we can, without exorbitant expense, provide for their needs. A reserved parking lot, private entrance, quality locker rooms and showers, full-service training rooms, an appointed shift briefing room, a weight and exercise room, a private dining area, a jogging track (the perimeter road), and many small conference rooms make a statement to staff: "You are important in the operation of this facility."
- **Lobby office suite.** Facilities have many visitors such as salesmen, volunteers, program staff, and chaplains who do not need access to the primary operational portion of the facility. By providing offices, meeting rooms, and work space outside the security perimeter it is possible to reduce the workload of central control personnel and avoid constant security disruptions. Staff can exit to meet with their visitors without



disrupting the facility. In addition, both personal and professional visitors can be processed by the receptionist and, if cleared, can enter the visitors' tunnel. This access point is essentially a very long "sallyport" that ends in the main compound within the visitors' center.

- **Vehicle sallyport.** We determined that considerable cost savings were possible if we did not cover the vehicle sallyport. Through value engineering, we got obvious answers to some questions such as: "With limited budgets, do you cover a vehicle sallyport or do you build staff and inmate facilities?" The design provides small but adequate offices outside the security perimeter for completing forms and testing for blood alcohol content, and the parking spaces are not completely covered. This design feature saves significant costs and does not affect facility operations.
- **Inmate intake and booking.** While similar in many respects to the present MDF intake area, the WCJF design incorporates some significant differences, including:
 - Greatly increased square footage to handle the anticipated increase in intakes.
 - A private medical examination office.
 - Separation of safety cells from the lounge.
 - Private interview offices.
 - "Looped" conduit for future automated equipment.

- Remote ceiling television speakers to reduce noise.
- Increased storage space for forms.
- A regular office desk instead of the traditional "stand up" booking desk to establish the environment of an office rather than a jail lockup.
- A transportation holding area located near the intake area, easily used during mass arrests.

- **Transportation holding.** One of the most obvious inconsistencies within the MDF has been the very sterile, noisy and hard environment of the transportation holding area. This area was initially designed with the thought that it must be hard because inmates are "nervous and disruptive" when being transported. When you consider that MDF inmates are removed from a clean and carpeted module and then placed in a cold and hard holding cell, the inconsistency becomes apparent. One of our principle functions in a direct supervision facility is to reduce stress. However, in the MDF transportation holding area we actually increased the stress on both staff and inmates.

The design of the WCJF transportation holding area continues to incorporate **the philosophy of direct supervision. It has enough holding**

rooms for the violent and protective classifications, but the rest of the area consists of three open bays with extensive acoustics, ceiling television speakers, and a normal waiting room environment.

- **Support services.** The MDF's most glaring design error was that support facilities and equipment were inadequate to provide for the needs of an inmate population beyond the facility's rated capacity. The facility was designed for 386 inmates; all essential support functions were also designed to accommodate 386 inmates. This meant that the laundry, kitchen, property, and essential storage were all inadequate once crowding began to have a major impact. At present, our population routinely exceeds 900; the MDF has required extensive renovation and additional equipment to provide the mandatory services.

"The first time, you axe the fool. The second time, I am the fool," governed the way we designed the support functions for the new facility. We determined that the WCJF would surely have more inmates than are currently in the system. This site was our future, so we sized the elements that

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provide the basic services to accommodate foreseeable growth in the future. The initial design capacity is 560, but all support functions were scaled to manage 1,600 inmates—almost triple the initial capacity. The intake and booking center, the inmate clothing room, the personal property files, the kitchen, laundry, storage, and maintenance spaces were all designed with the future in mind.

General Housing Module Features

- **Secure perimeter.** The first essential principle of direct supervision is effective control, which is based on a secure perimeter that allows certain inmates additional freedom from restraint. At the WCJF, we decided that it was important to provide a maximum security fence line to ensure that the campus concept would be successful. Therefore, a dual fence system was established, with a single fire access gate, a laser-straight perimeter patrol road, and both infrared and “shaker” cable detector systems.
- **Module populations.** The 1981 “gospel” was that modules should accommodate no more than fifty inmates. Experience has certainly proved to us that such a figure was inaccurate, based on assumptions proven invalid with direct supervision. For years, the MDF operated under “crowded” conditions with inmate populations of sixty-five with one staff member. In recent

Design Characteristics of WCJF Housing Modules

Eight general living housing units are contained in four individual buildings with the following features:

- Each building consists of two modules of sixty-four rooms, separated by a retractable door located between the two officers’ stations. On the early morning shift, the door will be opened and the building staffed and operated as one module. Upper balconies connect the modules to provide easy access during early morning patrols and welfare checks.
- The 70 sq. ft. rooms open directly into the large open module, with excellent sight lines from the officers’ station.
- The wooden doors are secured by both a “builder’s hardware” lock for normal use and an electronic deadbolt to be used during counts and emergency situations.
- Traditional sallyports within the housing units have been eliminated. Because inmates have easy access to the outdoors and the education complex during much of the day, there seemed no reason to build sallyports to enter or exit the modules.
- The rooms are “dry,” with all toilets, sinks, and showers located directly across from the officers’ station. All toilets and showers are tiled floor to ceiling to limit future maintenance.
- Cell walls are laminated sheetrock covered by a plastic coating to prevent chipping and peeling.
- The open module area is elevated eighteen inches to improve staff vision into the module.
- Each module has a room set aside for interviews with inmates.
- Each building has a fully equipped classroom that can be accessed from either module.
- Pantries in each module are large enough to accommodate a doubling of the inmate population.
- Each module has an individual courtyard with a weight machine and basketball and handball courts. To control noise, all athletic recreation will take place outdoors.
- Considerable effort has been made to reduce the impact of noise on staff and inmates. Television speakers were placed in the ceiling, directing the sound down into the carpet and not out into the module. The ceilings and expansive walls were covered with acoustic materials to absorb reflecting sound.

years this population has grown to 120 with an additional staff member. Our conclusion was that there was no reason to build WCJF modules for fewer than

sixty-five inmates, especially given the resulting savings in life-cycle staffing costs for the facility. Therefore, we decided to build the general living units for sixty-four

inmates, sixty-five being an uneven number for our architects to work with.

Sheetrock walls. Quite frankly, the concept of using sheetrock for the room walls seemed ridiculous at first. However, after ten years, there had been no damage to the MDF room walls. We realized that if the door is open and the more continually inspected, an inmate would be highly unlikely to attempt such penetration. Further, in a blind test on a representative MDF wall and the proposed sheet rock wall, both performed equally well. We were surprised to find that a solid sheetrock wall was an acceptable and cost-efficient alternative to a traditional block or concrete plaster wall.

Retractable module walls. There is no question that local agencies must design facilities to minimize their future life-cycle staff costs. WCJF's design and its use of the principles of direct supervision make it possible to reduce staff costs without diminishing inmate supervision. The design separates the buildings into two component modules, each fully equipped and independent. However, during early morning hours when inmates are sleeping, the module can be easily converted into a single supervised unit, saving one morning watch post per building. In addition, there will be a number of times every day when the modules are relatively empty due to work assignments, court appear-

ances, and program participation. During such times, the supervisor may direct staff to open the door and operate the modules as one. A staff member

is thus freed of module responsibility and can be utilized elsewhere.

- **Dry cells.**

The "dry cell" concept was not adopted entirely to provide cost savings for the project, although such savings were considerable. The concept simply made good, common sense. Do dormitories have toilets at the foot of each bed? Do any of you have toilets in your bedroom? We have come to expect that toilets will be present in each single cell. Our experience at the MDF and the Marsh Creek facility plainly indicated that providing single cell toilets for an entire inmate population was an unnecessary construction and operational expense. We have 386 toilets at the MDF, but we do not have 386 inmates who are locked down and need toilets in their cells. We decided that we did not require single cell toilets at the WCJF.

Designing for Inmate Programs

One important lesson gained over the past decade is that as an agency adapts to the principles of direct supervision, administrators see a need to increase the agency's capa-

bility of providing programming for inmates. This is also true in Contra Costa County. As the demand for education and substance abuse

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programs increased, we found that our existing facilities severely limited our ability to adequately provide such programming. For the WCJF, we gave considerable thought to education, industry, and substance abuse programming needs of the future. If we did not construct adequate program space now, it might never be provided.

Education Buildings

The WCIF's operating philosophy is that all inmates will either work or be involved in a program. If inmates do not work or study, they don't live there. To provide the necessary space to accommodate this philosophy, we provided the following programming resources at the WCJF:

- Ample program office and supply space is provided for education administration, teachers, and clerical staff-all adjacent to their primary work locations.
- A fully-equipped recreation, education, and reference library is located in the classroom complex.
- Two classrooms were designed and wired to facilitate both computer training and automated literacy education.

- A large, subdividable multi-purpose auditorium was established for religious services, education programs, and large assemblies.
- A classroom is located in each of the four general living modules and in the intake/classification module.
- Four additional classrooms were allocated for arts and crafts and general education.

Medical Building

Once the decision was made to consolidate staff and medical resources at the MDF instead of duplicating this important activity at the WCJF, it became apparent that our medical responsibility could be fulfilled with a simple medical clinic rather than an infirmary. The features of this design are as follows:

- Instead of submitting a sick call slip, inmates will telephone from the module to an "advice" nurse for consultation, and if necessary, to secure a medical appointment.
- All medication will be dispensed from a specially designed pharmacy window instead of being transported to each housing module.
- Specialized rooms have been designed for medical exams, dentistry, and mental health consultations. Additional large staff areas have been designed to provide space for charting and medical record storage.

Visiting Center

Directly from the lobby tunnel, visitors will emerge into the visiting center, which is designed as follows:

- Sufficient private visiting rooms are available to accommodate attorneys, probation officers, and social service employees.
- Non-contact visiting is provided for those inmates assigned to the intake/classification module and who are under disciplinary sanction.
- For those assigned to the general living modules, most visiting will be family contact visiting. The inmate is responsible for scheduling and arranging for visitors. Once an appointment is made for a visiting time, it is the responsibility of both the inmate and the visitor to appear at the designated time. If either one fails to appear, the visit is canceled.

A fully-equipped video arraignment center is connected with the four independent judicial districts in the county.

Conclusions

The WCJF is an important facility for Contra Costa County. It is also important for the field of corrections. The concepts at work in our newest facility were based on extensive staff input and actual experience with the concept of direct supervision. Fortunately, we have been able to expand on our base of information and our knowledge about inmates to create something that is unique.

Those agencies presently planning new direct supervision facilities will find that many of the innovations are directly applicable to existing design projects. Given our past experience, I do not think anyone should design general population modules to accommodate less than sixty-four inmates. I also do not believe that the entire facility requires single cell toilets.

While each agency will have to make its own decisions, I believe that planners should give full consideration to many of the direct supervision innovations that have been developed nationwide. If we fail to evaluate or to use the resulting information, we are not providing a service to our communities or our profession.

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