

Jail Design Issues: Breaking the Prison Paradigm

JAILS HISTORICALLY

have operated in the shadow of prisons. Knowledge and information gained from the planning, design, and operation of prison systems have more often than not provided the basis for jail planning and design.

In many ways, this has been beneficial. Expertise and technological advances in construction techniques, electronic security systems, locking devices, and security furnishings and fixtures have all benefited jails over the years. Unfortunately, the similarity between jails and prisons in terms of these issues has created a sort of “umbrella effect” that leads many to assume that jails and prisons are also comparable in areas where they are, in fact, radically different from each other.

Jail management and operations have improved significantly over the past few decades. Although these issues may seem like “no-brainers” now, staff training, policy and procedure development, clarification of constitutional issues, the development of professional standards, and new

concepts of inmate management have all contributed to the overall professionalization of jail management and operations.

The podular design concept, which originated in the Federal Bureau of Prisons as part of the agency’s development and implementation of Unit Management, is a good example of how changes in design have had an almost revolutionary impact on facility operations and inmate management. In jails, the podular design concept resulted in podular/remote surveillance and podular/direct supervision. The impact of these design and inmate management strategies has been remarkable. Today, it is rare to see a new facility designed as a traditional linear/intermittent surveillance jail.

Podular designs have provided opportunities not only for greater effectiveness in inmate management, but also for increased programming. As innovative as they have been, however, podular design concepts focus primarily on inmate housing areas and, to some degree, on intake and booking.

JAIL MANAGEMENT

and operations have now reached a degree of sophistication, but continued growth, development, and progress are being thwarted by infrastructure problems. These infrastructure problems are based on design shortcomings that have resulted from erroneous assumptions.

My observations from more than 25 years of involvement in various aspects of jail planning, design, construction, transition, administration, and operation have led me to two conclusions:

- 1) Jails are traditionally designed based on a prison paradigm, albeit a somewhat modified version.
- 2) The prison paradigm—no matter how modified—is inadequate as a paradigm for jails.

Prisons are long-term facilities that generally are defined and designed primarily on the basis of average daily population (ADP). In prisons, inmate housing requirements form the base on which all other services are developed.

Although jails also have a major inmate housing function, they are

By **MICHAEL O’TOOLE**, Consultant and former Chief, NIC Jails Division, Denver, Colorado.

more accurately characterized by the number of inmates they process than by ADP alone. For example, based on U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics data, a 1,000-bed prison may process only 500 intakes and 500 releases in a year. On the other hand, a 1,000-bed jail may process between 25,000 and 30,000 intakes a year, and between 25,000 and 30,000 releases. The differences in these numbers alone indicate that there is very little in the prison admission process that can adequately inform a jail central intake and booking process. The reality is different for the two kinds of facilities.

The inadequacies and problems I see with jail booking and intake housing are almost invariably attributable to mistakenly following the prison paradigm. It may be adequate for a prison to have a part-time admission and release unit as an adjunct to its housing. But for a jail, where admissions and releases are in themselves almost a defining function, the intake and booking unit must be planned and designed as a related, but separate and distinct, function within the jail.

Furthermore, jail inmates usually come directly off the street. Many are mentally ill and in crisis, and a majority of them are under the influence of alcohol or drugs. This is quite a different profile from the inmates being admitted into a prison, most of whom have already been in custody for some length of time.

The medical, mental health, and short-term holding requirements for individuals admitted to jails bear little

resemblance to those for individuals being admitted to prisons. It is well documented, for example, that jail suicide attempts are far more likely to occur during the initial hours of confinement.

Jail data also indicate that the majority of those booked into jail are short-term detainees who are released within a few days. By contrast, the inmates who make up the general population and who account for most of the jail's ADP represent a small percentage of total bookings. In jails with inadequate intake housing, short-term detainees may be placed briefly in general population before being released, creating unnecessary disruption in the operation of the unit. Indeed, jail administrators often complain that it is this turnover in general population that thwarts operational consistency and program development.

These are essentially design issues. If jurisdictions had planned, designed, and constructed adequate short-term holding units as part of a more comprehensive jail intake unit—instead of building modified prison-model intake units—they now would have relatively stable, and fairly long-term, general population housing units.

THE JAIL, UNLIKE THE prison, is not a monolithic unit. It is an aggregate of several major, distinct functions that are grouped together and share core services such as perimeter security, food service, and medical services. In larger jail systems, the various functions may be located in separate facilities. The key differ-

ence in jails is that these functions are not merely adjuncts to general housing.

My purpose here is not to provide a complete litany of issues, but rather to create an awareness that the major limiting factor in the continuing advancement in jail management and operations is infrastructure—that is, design. If we want to have good, functional jails, then we will have to begin by abandoning our attachment to the prison paradigm and by developing a new paradigm that treats all the major jail functions equally—not simply as necessary adjuncts to long-term inmate housing. ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION

*Michael O'Toole
P.O. Box 18301
Denver, Colorado 80218
(303) 861-7614
maotoole@aol.com*
