

LITTLE HOOVER COMMISSION
WRITTEN TESTIMONY
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INTRODUCTION:

I have worked as the Associate Director of Female Offender Programs and Services/Special Housing since April 2012. My Mission has the responsibility to assist institutions with statewide visiting and to work with the Statewide Inmate Family Counsel (SIFC). The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) values visitation as a means of increasing safety in prisons, maintaining family and community connections, and preparing inmates for successful release and rehabilitation.

Visitation Process

An inmate must initiate the visitation process by first signing and then sending the visiting application form to the prospective visitors. The prospective visitor is not allowed to obtain the form from any other source; it must come from the inmate and must be signed by him/her, then sent out to the prospective visitor. Once this form is received, the prospective visitor must complete it and mail it back to the prison to the attention of the Visiting Sergeant or Lieutenant at the institution. A thorough background check of the prospective visitor's arrest history is completed to determine the prospective visitor's eligibility to visit a state prison. Once the application is approved, the inmate is notified and he/she can inform their visitor of the decision. If the application is denied, the inmate is notified of the denial; however, the applicant is also sent the denial, in addition to an explanation of the reason(s) for the denial.

Once approved for visitation, the visitor is responsible for obtaining information about the specific dates and times of visitation at the institution. The visitor may then visit the inmate on those days or times, and may also schedule an appointment to visit the inmate. The Visitor Processing Appointment Scheduling System (VPASS) is now offered at all institutions as an additional service to visitors to help expedite and enhance the visitation process for most types of visitation. Scheduling an appointment through this system will help to alleviate many lengthy visiting wait time issues while providing flexibility for each institution to set up the system to meeting their specific visiting needs and guidelines. There are instructional videos and brochures on CDCR's website that assist visitors with the process of scheduling an appointment through this system. However, at no time will any visitor be turned away or denied visitation solely for the inability to schedule an appointment through this system – scheduling an appointment is simply an additional tool available to improve the visitation process and experience. If a visitor

schedules a visit through this system, they will receive a confirmation number to bring to their scheduled visit.

When arriving at the institution for a visit, all visiting adults must provide identification for visitor processing. Processing includes having the visitor fill out a pass including the inmate's name and CDCR number, the visitor's relationship with the inmate, and the visitor's identifying information. CDCR staff then checks the inmate's file to ensure that the visitor is approved to visit the inmate, and that the inmate is eligible for a visit. Visitors and their personal items will then be searched prior to their visit.

Many prisons also have Visitor Centers, which may provide some babysitting and transportation services or some clothing assistance if the visitor's clothing does not meet Department rules for visitation. The Visitor Center staff may also be an available source of information for visitors.

Visitation Enhancements made in recent years

The CDCR is committed to removing barriers to visitation by providing training and creating a customer service environment aimed at supporting a positive experience while visiting as well as utilizing technology to enhance visitation.

Visitor Processing Appointment Scheduling System (VPASS)

CDCR staff, in partnership with local Inmate Family Councils (IFCs), has instituted an electronic visitor reservation system (VPASS) in English and Spanish for families and friends who wish to visit inmates. The system was implemented to enhance the visiting experience by reducing extremely long wait lines prior to the beginning of the visiting day. VPASS was initially piloted at 10 institutions on October 1, 2012, and implemented statewide on May 19, 2013.

Local IFCs and visiting staff worked together to identify the number of VPASS slots and times needed based on the individual design of the institution, the number of visiting rooms, and the number of visitors they receive at each location. VPASS has streamlined visiting by allowing visitors to make visiting appointments approximately one to two weeks in advance, depending on the institution, and allowing visitors to receive immediate confirmation of their scheduled appointment. Visitors with appointments no longer have to wait in long lines to visit as they show up prior to their scheduled time to be processed in, and wait times for visitors who do not have a scheduled appointment are also shorter as a result.

VPASS also provides a message board which notifies registered users, via email, when issues with visiting occur, such as the cancellation of visitation on a specific day. A variety of updates and enhancements, such as video tutorial, have been installed in the system which assists with making VPASS more user-friendly. This is evident due to the number of positive comments the Department has received on the system since its implementation.

Statewide Inmate Family Council (SIFC)/Inmate Family Council (IFC)

The Department has a positive open relationship with SIFC/IFC. Quarterly meetings are held with the Director, Division of Adult Institutions to address concerns and keep the lines of communication open with the SIFC Chairperson and the Councils regarding policy and/or

regulation changes, and also serve as a valuable way to share information, identify issues and resolve problems. CDCR staff attend Regional SIFC Workshop Training for the local IFCs in Southern and Northern California to provide updates and to address concerns regarding Visiting.

A workgroup consisting of Headquarters staff, Wardens, and SIFC/IFC members has been established to share ideas and brainstorm how to recruit for and enhance the local IFC membership at each institution. The expected outcome is to make local IFCs more efficient and effective, and to explore the use of Town Hall meetings in place of IFC meetings when IFCs are not active at institutions. Recent workgroup meetings have generated agreements to provide information regarding the SIFC/IFC on the CDCR web site as well as the status of IFCs at each institution.

Visitor assistance

CDCR staff, in partnership with the SIFC has created a Visitor Handbook, available on CDCR's Visitation Webpage, which was specifically designed for new visitors to assist while visiting at institutions.

Visiting room enhancements

Cashless Vending was originally piloted by the Department of Rehabilitation in conjunction with the CDCR and Folsom State Prison. Cashless Vending simplifies the need to carry quarters and dollar bills to the visiting rooms, which improves visitor processing timeliness and expedites the processing time to the visiting rooms. The department is committed to work with the Department of Rehabilitation and the SIFC to expand the availability of cashless vending to visiting rooms statewide.

Discussion items and potential improvements

The Department is exploring many facets of multimedia interaction to include video phone calls and email communication to enhance inmate privileges with contact with family and friends. Some of the potential barriers to the use of these types of technologies include funding, availability of connectivity of data/phone lines, space/logistic issues, and cost to family members for the service.

Other challenges to overcome as the Department works to expand and enhance available contact and visitation methods for inmates include working to ensure victims, including inmate family members and children, are not re-victimized. For instance, if an inmate parent has lost custody of a child or is not allowed by the courts to visit their child, the Department needs to ensure we protect the child from re-victimization. As the Department works to expand visitation and inmate-visitor contacts through the use of expanding technologies, the Department must also work to ensure that such expansions are also in line with the Department's larger mission of public safety.