

JAIL BULLETIN

NUMBER 1

JANUARY 1985

JAIL BULLETIN

The Jail Bulletin is a monthly feature of the Crime Commission Update. The Bulletin may be used as a supplement to your jail inservice training program if officers study the material and complete the attached "open book" quiz. The Bulletin and quiz may be reproduced for use by your staff. We welcome any jail training material you would like to contribute to the Bulletin.

REPORT WRITING

Writing reports is a normal, yet critical, task for jail employees. It is a normal task in that it is done daily, but more importantly, reports reflect the on-going, permanent record of events and transactions of the jail facility. It is a critical task since reports do provide documentation, and this is important in the event of litigation.

A report, by definition, is a formal presentation of facts. It is a presentation since it is prepared for others to read, therefore, it would contain facts, not judgments, innuendos, or opinions. Another vital characteristic of a report is that once it is written, it becomes permanent record. The written report also reflects on the writer's competency in the narrow sense, and in the broad sense reflects on organization professionalism because it is a record that is available for review by all elements of the criminal justice system, including inmates and their attorneys. A report is a legal document. As a general rule....

A report is written for any unusual incident or situation or as documentation of any procedure or event which impacts on the safety and security of the facility and its occupants or the legality or constitutionality of department operations.

Reports in correction facilities tend to fall into one of three different areas:

- 1) Reports completed by others which jail staff must review for accuracy and completeness.

These reports would include court documents, visitor's logs, admission/release reports, etc. It is critical that the officer in this case know what sections must be completed and that proper signatures appear on the report.

- 2) Reports which the officer completes but require no narrative information.

Head counts, perimeter checks, cell and dorm checks, medication logs, etc. Unusual incidents or situations should be noted on these reports.

- 3) Reports which the officer completes and requires narrative statements.

These can range from short remarks in the Pass-down Log to detailed descriptions of events/incidents. These reports tend to be the most difficult since they require the greatest report writing skills. It is these reports that we will focus our greatest attention on.

SEVEN ESSENTIALS OF REPORT WRITING

To properly and completely relate an idea, incident, or event, information and data must be collected which provide the answers to certain basic questions. These basic questions which must be answered are known as the seven essentials of report writing.

WHO? Who was involved? All persons involved in the incident should be identified. For inmates this includes: name, living quarters (assigned cellblock or cell numbers, dormitory/bed numbers, or other appropriate designations) and work assignment (work release?). The officer writing the report might also want to consider WHO...

- ...Reported the infraction;
- ...Discovered the infraction;
- ...Is (are) the victim(s);
- ...Is (are) the offender(s);
- ...Is (are) the witness(es);
- ...Is (are) the accomplice(s);
- ...Is (are) possible suspect(s); and
- ...Can be contacted later for further information.

WHAT? What offense or crime occurred? What took place that called for a report? Was it fighting, possession of contraband, attempting to escape, or assault? The officer should also consider WHAT...

- ...Kind of damage was done;
- ...Is the value of the property lost, stolen, or recovered;
- ...Evidence was left at the scene;
- ...Crime was committed;
- ...Kind of weapons or tools were used; and
- ...Further action needs to be taken.

WHERE? Where did it happen? The officer should be specific rather than general: It is taken for granted that the incident occurred at the jail, but where, specifically, did it take place? The officer should also consider WHERE...

- ...Was the infraction committed;
- ...Was the victim when the incident occurred;
- ...Was/were the witness(es) when the observation(s) was/were made;

- ...Were the tools or weapons obtained; and
- ...Has a similar infraction been committed (inside the jail).

WHEN? What time did it happen? Indicate the answer by stating the time using whatever time reference system is followed at the jail), the day, and the date. Some further considerations include WHEN...

- ...Was the infraction committed;
- ...Was the infraction discovered;
- ...Was the infraction reported to the jail officer;
- ...Was/were the suspect(s) observed;
- ...How long did it take to commit the infraction, and
- ...Did the inmate have enough time to dispose of the evidence.

HOW? How did the crime or the incident occur? It pays to answer the "how" question in as much detail as possible. The answers will sometimes point out shortcomings in the operation of the jail. For example HOW...

- ...Did the hacksaw blades get into the jail;
- ...Did the marijuana get into the jail;
- ...Did the inmates jam the locks on the cell doors;
- ...Did the fire start;
- ...Did the witness learn the facts; and
- ...Did the accident occur.

WHY? In seeking an answer to the question "why", the officer attempts to determine a motive. We should ask WHY...

- ...Did it happen;
- ...Was the infraction committed;
- ...Was a certain method used;
- ...Was this particular victim selected;
- ...Was the time of commission selected;
- ...Was the infraction reported at a delayed time;
- ...Were certain or specific items taken; and
- ...Were certain tools or weapons used.

The officer should state only facts. He should not guess or include hearsay statements unless he qualifies each statement by saying it is hearsay. The officer should not consciously or unconsciously prejudice his report for or against the person(s) involved.

ACTION? What action did the officer take? What disposition was made of the evidence, inmate, victim, and witnesses involved? The officer should be certain to include all action which has been taken and list any action which is pending, such as persons to be interviewed and an analysis of evidence.

THE FIVE REQUIREMENTS OF A REPORT

When the officer has obtained information and data to provide the answers to as many of the seven essentials of effective report writing as possible, then they can write the report. The report which the officer submits to their supervisor should fulfill five requirements.

The written report should be:

- 1) Complete. All necessary facts should be included so that no additional information is required. If appropriate, all seven essentials of effective report writing must be answered; otherwise, the report will not be complete. Ask yourself the question, "If I were reading this report, would it make sense?"
- 2) Concise. Do not use any unnecessary words. Use simple sentences.
- 3) Clear. Stick to the facts and use simple, descriptive words. Keep the report in chronological order.
- 4) Correct. Present only the actual facts. Make certain words, names, and numbers are spelled and listed correctly and that grammar is correct. Keep the report neat in appearance.
- 5) Courteous. Be cooperative and not antagonistic; be objective and fair in the presentation. Remember--the submitted report reflects the personality and training of its writer.

Notetaking:

In order to write a complete and accurate report, the officer must take comprehensive notes when they are obtaining information about the incident. If the officer is directly participating in the incident (such as breaking up a fight), they should begin compiling their notes as soon as the incident is over.

WRITING THE REPORT:

A report is a permanent record, therefore, once it is done it becomes a legal document. It is important that you say what you want to say factually and no more. Remember that the purpose of your report is to communicate information. Describe things as they are observed, not as you think they might be. Marijuana is a good example. It should be described as "a substance that appeared to be marijuana". Keep in mind that your report may appear in court.

Do not call yourself "this officer" or "the undersigned" or use "I, Officer Smith". It is simpler and easier just to use "I" or "me".

WORD CHOICE:

- 1) Word choice is critical too. The word "indicate" is a highly ambiguous word...a person can "indicate" by saying something, by shaking their head, by pointing, by glancing...you can "indicate" directly or indirectly.

EXAMPLE:

BAD: Smedley indicated that he did not want to change cells.

BETTER: Smedley said "You ain't taking me outa this cell, Honky!"

Now the reader knows how Smedley feels...what and how he was indicating. (When the word "indicate" is used in court testimony, many times the sentence is stricken as "conclusionary".)

- 2) Instead of using vague words such as "observed" or "detected" simply say what you mean.

EXAMPLE:

BAD: I observed that there was a knife on the cell floor.

BETTER: I saw a knife on the floor of cell #13.

- 3) Here is a list of popular expressions and a word substitute. By eliminating words, we make report writing easier and increase clarity.

BAD:

BETTER:

Related
Stated
Explained
Articulated
Verbalized

Said

Informed
Advised
Notified
Instructed

Told

Altercation
Mutual combat
Physical confrontation

Fight

Verbal altercation
Verbal dispute
Heated debate
Fiery exchange of words
Verbal flare-up

Argument

Regarding
In regard to
Reference
In reference to

About

Due to the fact that
In view of the fact that
In light of the fact that

Because

At this point
At this time
At which time
At this point in time

Then

Kept under observation
Maintained surveillance over
Visually monitored

Watched

PRESERVATION OF EVIDENCE:

Evidence should be picked up by the person who found it and not passed from person to person. The evidence should be marked, noted, reported, and a documented chain of custody tag or envelope properly initialed. The chain of custody tag or envelope is initialed and dated each time a different person takes possession.

Profanity: When profanity is to be quoted, each profane word should be spelled out. Since these utterances are recorded as fact in a legal document, it is proper to give each word in full.

CHECK IT OVER: You may have to read it in front of other persons so before submitting it, read it over twice and correct all poor grammar, spelling, etc., and add any facts, names, or missing information that would clarify.

AUTHENTICITY: When you are certain and comfortable that your report is correct and complete, your signature at its end indicates the report is actually and exactly what you have claimed.

SUMMARY

- 1) The jail officer's responsibility to maintain accurate records is equally as important as any other duties he is assigned.

An officer cannot continuously avoid situations that require written reports and still carry out his responsibilities adequately. Moreover, since inmate-initialed litigation against correctional officers has intensified in recent years, an officer must know how to prepare accurate written reports for his own protection. Some major areas of correctional operations which require accurate and detailed recordkeeping include: inmate activities (correspondence, visitation, medical treatment, recreation, and religious activities) inmate misconduct and disciplinary actions, inmate complaints, court appearances, inmate property records, and records on activities of correctional staff members.

- 2) When an incident occurs in the facility, the correctional officer should prepare a complete written report as soon after the incident as possible.

He should never rely on his memory. The officer should take complete notes about each incident which provide answers to the questions; who, what, where, when, how, and why. In addition, the officer should completely describe the actions that were taken by him and other officers assisting him. When writing his report, the officer should make certain that he states only facts--he should not guess or include hearsay statements, nor should he consciously or unconsciously prejudice his report for or against the persons involved. The officer's written report should be complete, concise, clear, correct, and courteous.

- 3) Written reports are legal documents. Reports are permanent records of your department. Your reports are authenticated by your signature.

---Adapted from material contributed by:
Jay Kucera, Correctional Training Officer
Lancaster County Department of Correction

There are many more examples, of course. Review a few of your old reports and see how often you've used ambiguous or meaningless language where shorter and more precise language would have achieved your communication goal much better.

Example:

BAD: On above date and time at referenced location, I, Officer Friendly, was verbally advised by reporting party that two inmates became engaged in a verbal dispute, which then escalated into a physical altercation between the two. It was unknown by reporting party which of the inmates had actually initiated the physical altercation which resulted. It should be noted that when this officer responded to the location of the first inmate, this officer was able to observe no indications of the altercation, except that on contacting the other inmate, I, Officer Friendly, ascertained that the inmate was indicating that he was suffering a painful head. It should be noted further that in view of this fact, the nurse, who was on duty, was requested by this officer, at this time, to check the inmate. After the nurse checked this inmate, I, Officer Friendly, called for an ambulance.

BETTER: Inmate Bird told me that inmates Goon and Meek argued and then fought, but Inmate Bird did not know which of them was first to use force. Meek said his head hurt so I called the nurse. The nurse checked Meek and an ambulance was called at 2:30 p.m. Inmate returned at 3:45 p.m.

- 4) The unanswered question is created by use of the passive voice. The active voice sentence sets a positive tone and sometimes uses less words.

Example:

Passive: Percy was booked in by me.

Active: I booked-in Percy.

Passive: A knife was found in Harley's right boot. (Who found it? Will you remember later who found the knife?)

Active: Officer Raybo found a knife in Harley's right boot.

If you can say it in the active voice, don't use the passive...your reports will answer questions, rather than raising them, and will be informative, rather than wordy.

A well-written report...

- ...Documents consistent application of facility policies and procedures;
- ...Is a legal document and a permanent record
- ...Has wide circulation (courts, other elements of the criminal justice system, inmate, attorneys);
- ...Reflects on competency and character of reporter;
- ...Does not make assumptions or claim opinions...It just states facts.

QUIZ

Nebraska Jail Standards require that jail staff receive eighteen (18) hours of inservice training each year. The Jail Bulletin may be used to supplement inservice training if an officer studies the bulletin, completes the quiz, and this process is documented by the jail administrator for review during annual jail inspections.

SUBJECT: REPORT WRITING, #1

NAME: _____

- 1) A report is a _____
The purpose of the report is to _____
- 2) Once a report is written, it becomes _____ record and is a _____
- 3) Reports in jail facilities fall into three different areas. They are...
 - 1) _____
 - 2) _____
 - 3) _____
- 4) The seven essential questions asked in a complete report are: 1) _____
2) _____ 3) _____ 4) _____ 5) _____ 6) _____ 7) _____
- 5) The five requirements of a report are:
 - 1) _____
 - 2) _____
 - 3) _____
 - 4) _____
 - 5) _____
- 6) T F After writing the report, the officer authenticates it with his signature.
- 7) T F Profanity should never be spelled out in a report because you never know who will read it.
- 8) T F A well-written report documents consistent application of facility policies and procedures.
- 9) A well-written report....
 - 1) _____
 - 2) _____
 - 3) _____
 - 4) _____
 - 5) _____

CREDIT: 1/2 hour credit for jail inspection

QUIZ

Nebraska Jail Standards require that jail staff receive eighteen (18) hours of inservice training each year. The Jail Bulletin may be used to supplement inservice training if an officer studies the bulletin, completes the quiz, and this process is documented by the jail administrator for review during annual jail inspections.

SUBJECT: REPORT WRITING, #1

NAME: _____

- 1) A report is a FORMAL PRESENTATION OF FACTS.
The purpose of the report is to DOCUMENT ANY UNUSUAL INCIDENT.
- 2) Once a report is written, it becomes PERMANENT record and is a LEGAL DOCUMENT.
- 3) Reports in jail facilities fall into three different areas. They are...
 - 1) REPORTS COMPLETED BY OTHERS WHICH STAFF REVIEWS FOR ACCURACY/COMPLETENESS
 - 2) REPORTS THE OFFICER COMPLETES BUT REQUIRE NO NARRATIVE INFORMATION
 - 3) REPORTS WHICH THE OFFICER COMPLETES AND REQUIRE NARRATIVE STATEMENTS
- 4) The seven essential questions asked in a complete report are: 1) WHO
2) WHAT 3) WHERE 4) WHEN 5) HOW 6) WHY 7) ACTION
- 5) The five requirements of a report are:
 - 1) COMPLETE
 - 2) CONCISE
 - 3) CLEAR
 - 4) CORRECT
 - 5) COURTEOUS
- 6) T F After writing the report, the officer authenticates it with his signature.
- 7) T F Profanity should never be spelled out in a report because you never know who will read it.
- 8) T F A well-written report documents consistent application of facility policies and procedures.
- 9) A well-written report....
 - 1) DOCUMENTS CONSISTENT APPLICATION OF FACILITY POLICIES AND PROCEDURES
 - 2) IS A LEGAL DOCUMENT AND PERMANENT RECORD
 - 3) HAS WIDE CIRCULATION
 - 4) REFLECTS ON COMPETENCY AND CHARACTER OF REPORTER
 - 5) DOES NOT MAKE ASSUMPTIONS OR CLAIM OPINIONS