

JAIL BULLETIN

Number 64

May, 1990

INMATE ACTIVITIES

A. Introduction: What are Inmate Activities, and Why Should You Provide Them?

You can provide various forms of leisure and recreational activities to keep your inmates busy and in good physical and mental health. They can be performed at times when inmates are not at meals or participating in regularly scheduled tasks.

Leisure or recreational activities can be passive, such as table or board games, arts and crafts, hobbies, reading, watching television or movies, or listening to the radio and presentations, demonstrations, or productions by outside groups or individuals.

They can also be active, including exercise, (basketball, soccer, frisbee, weight lifting) and physically active table games (ping pong, air hockey, etc.).

By providing these activities, you should find it easier to manage and supervise inmates, since they will have more to occupy their time and fewer opportunities for vandalism. Inmates will be able to release physical energy and tension in constructive ways, keeping themselves in better physical and mental health. Since stress is reduced, inmate and staff morale should improve.

Remember that you can be held personally liable, and face court action, if you do not meet your responsibilities for the physical and mental health of inmates.

B. How Can You Provide Inmate Activities?

Some of the major problems faced by jails are that they are understaffed, lack funding, and have little space; but this does not absolve you of your responsibility to provide inmate activities that ensure the physical and mental health of your inmates. With a little creativity and ingenuity, you can provide adequate inmate activities that are not costly, do not require much space, and require no additional staff.

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1. Passive Leisure-Time Activities

Among these activities are games and hobbies, arts and crafts, radio, television and movies, reading, presentations, demonstrations and productions by outside groups or individuals. These require little space, can be provided at low cost, and usually require only minimal supervision.

Table games (activities such as checkers, chess, dominoes, and card playing) can provide your inmates with many hours of leisure activities, and require no more than a table. They are also inexpensive. By soliciting donations from different groups and businesses in your community, table games can often be provided at no cost.

Some jail staff hesitate to use table games because they might lead to gambling. Inmates who want to gamble will find ways to do so whether table games are provided or not. An alert staff can keep gambling to a minimum.

Television has proven to be a valuable leisure-time activity for jails. When disturbances occur, the jail television sets are usually not damaged because inmates value them. However, some jails have found that limiting television viewing provides additional incentives for inmates to participate in programs and work projects outside of their housing area.

If you can not afford a set, check with local merchants and civic organizations for possible donations.

Consider placing a television set in an area where the inmate population has ready access to it. If possible, enclose the set to prevent your "resident experts" from trying to make repairs. Make a schedule of the times when inmates can watch television, and stick to it. If absolutely necessary, you can make occasional exceptions.

Radios provide inmates with musical entertainment and informational programs; they are inexpensive, and require almost no space or direct staff supervision.

Although you may allow inmates to use their own radios, set guidelines for the types of radios. If the noise level becomes a problem, require the use of earphones, or schedule hours that radios may be used. Keep a good supply of batteries on hand in your jail commissary. The use of radios and televisions by inmates can serve as a damper when inmate problems arise. The possibility of losing these leisure activities can often help "keep the lid" on problems, and give your jail staff time to work the problem out.

Arts and crafts, such as painting, are a good way to keep your inmates busy for long periods of time at little cost. You may want to sell craft kits to inmates through the jail commissary, or to solicit them as donations. Schools and individuals in the community are often willing to volunteer their time to develop an arts and crafts program at the jail.

Movies are another good form of leisure-time activity. Through your local schools, university, or state department of education, you can usually borrow films and movie equipment on a regular basis, without cost. Of course, video cassettes are readily available for rental, but be sure to know and follow the pertinent copyright requirements that will apply to group viewing.

Presentations, demonstrations, or productions by outside groups or individuals not only keep your inmates busy, but also offer the community ways to be involved at the jail. They can include plays or concerts, information on products manufactured by a local company, travel programs, and other programs.

2. Active Physical Leisure or Recreation

Indoor physical recreation provides your inmates with a way to relieve physical energy and tensions non-destructively. This reduces vandalism in the jail, improves the physical and mental health of the inmates, and makes it easier for your staff to manage them.

Having sufficient space for indoor physical recreation is a problem for many small jails, but you should be able to find some areas. The size and type of area will determine what recreational activities can be conducted.

Weight-lifting, calisthenics, and other means of working out do not require a large area or space. Mini-gyms (small spaces converted, or used temporarily, for exercise) available at a reasonable cost, require only limited space and provide a variety of forms of exercise and conditioning. Active table games, such as ping-pong or air-hockey can be set up in a fairly small area and can be stored when not in use.

You may be able to use recreational facilities at your local YMCA, Boys' Club, or school, perhaps even a swimming pool for inmates who are classified as low-security risks.

Remember that some of this equipment is potentially dangerous; supervision is probably necessary when weights are being used, and they should always be returned to a locked central area.

3. Outdoor Recreation

If you have a secure outdoor exercise area, make use of it as often as the weather permits (daily, if possible). Those jails that do not have secure outdoor exercise areas may be able to make arrangements with other institutions for exercise time for low-security inmates. When inmates are in this area, be sure they are actually getting exercise; frequently inmates will only stand and talk, getting little exercise or change from their in-cell activities. You can organize games, such as volleyball, basketball, or whiffle-ball, or contests in frisbee or free shooting.

Organized outdoor exercise or recreation requires close supervision by your staff; more escapes occur during outdoor recreation periods than at any other time.

Supervising staff should not join in games being played, but should concentrate on keeping order and control, and make sure that the recreational period is going according to schedule. They should circulate around the recreational area, watching and listening for possible problems, while remaining as inconspicuous as possible. Remember that inmates may try to involve staff in games or disputes arising from games as a diversionary tactic for an escape or other activity contrary to rules.

Make an effort to use the outdoor recreation area for special occasions, such as cookouts or field events, or holidays. This will give you added flexibility, and offers inmates a change from the routines of detention.

If you do not have an outdoor recreation area, take a close look at the outdoor area surrounding your jail and examine the possibilities of converting a portion of it into a secure space for recreation and exercise.

Get an estimate of what it would cost to convert this area for your purposes by finding out: whether you would need to purchase the land; how much it would cost to fence in the area; how much it would cost to landscape or surface the area; and what recreational equipment would cost for this area. Remember to include costs of providing lighting.

If the estimate seems reasonable, write up a proposal for your supervisor and funding sources; you have nothing to lose and much to gain.

C. Scheduling Inmate Activities

Develop a plan for daily inmate activities, indoor and outdoor, active and passive, and include it in your "plan of the day." Be sure that copies of the plan are posted throughout the jail, including all cells. Keep it up-to-date, and appropriate to the weather and group of inmates.

D. Developing and Maintaining Inmate Activities

Be sure to regularly inventory the resources you have within the jail — sets of cards, books, equipment, and other items, and include funds for replacement in your budget.

Invite inmate comments about activities available to them and implement those which seem appropriate.

Use local resources for advice and assistance in developing and staffing programs, as well as donating time, equipment, and money. The local recreation or parks department should be able to help you, as should local colleges and schools, and, perhaps, environmental groups.

Finally, keep careful records of all inmate activities. Enter major activities and events into your daily log. Consider keeping a record for each inmate.

This issue of the "Jail Bulletin" is taken from the Small Jail Resource Manual, Fourth Edition, Rod Miller and Ralph Nichols, authors, sponsored by The National Institute of Corrections, U.S. Department of Justice.

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QUIZ

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

SUBJECT: INMATE ACTIVITIES

NAME _____

NUMBER: 64

DATE _____

1. Table games should not be allowed in jails because inmates will gamble with them.
 TRUE FALSE

2. If you provide both passive and active exercise for inmates, you should find them easier to manage and exercise.
 TRUE FALSE

3. _____ is probably necessary when weights are being used for exercise.

4. More escapes occur during _____ periods than at any other time.

5. Supervising jail staff should always join in and play games with the inmates.
 TRUE FALSE

CREDIT: 1/2 HOUR CREDIT FOR JAIL IN-SERVICE TRAINING REQUIREMENT.

ANSWER SHEET SHOULD BE RETAINED BY JAIL ADMINISTRATOR OR TRAINING OFFICER.

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2. If you provide both passive and active exercise for inmates, you should find them easier to manage and exercise.
 TRUE FALSE
3. SUPERVISION is probably necessary when weights are being used for exercise.
4. More escapes occur during OUTDOOR RECREATION periods than at any other time.
5. Supervising jail staff should always join in and play games with the inmates.
 TRUE FALSE

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