

JAIL BULLETIN

Number 70

November/December, 1990

SPECIAL NEEDS INMATES PART VI

GENERAL CONDITIONS OF CONFINEMENT

The operations and facility should not combine to create conditions of confinement which create stress or anxiety for prisoners.

The operational context (rules, discipline, activities, services, programs) combines with the physical plant (light, heat, noise, ventilation, sanitation, physical plant design and condition) to create an environment which can encourage thoughts of self-destruction. In a broad sense, improving the total environment of the facility contributes to suicide prevention efforts.

PHYSICAL PLANT

The facility design, construction and condition should not contribute to the desire of prisoners to harm themselves, should not allow opportunities for self-destruction, and should support communication and interaction between prisoners and staff.

Particular attention should be given to every detail of rooms which are used to house prisoners who are violent and/or self-destructive. Many of these issues (and lessons) can be transposed to other cells/rooms of the facility, but care must be taken not to impose these precautions on other prisoners to the extent that the cells become dehumanizing and contribute to anxiety or depression.

The inventory provides a long list of physical plant features which warrant evaluation. Unfortunately, there is disagreement about certain features and solutions. For instance, some experts advocate the use of clear glazing (security glass or plastic laminate) instead of bars or screens; others believe that fine (3/16 inch) security screening is a better alternative. In Massachusetts, a new state law has mandated the use of glazing to cover all cell fronts. In some instances, this has created ventilation and heating problems.

Again, the authors stress that audio or visual communication equipment should not be used as a substitute for personal staff supervision or direct observation. Such equipment is a valuable supportive tool, but too often results in a false sense of security. Electronic monitoring does not provide the same information as direct observation or supervision, and often increases prisoner disorientation and dehumanization.

Some experts suggest that sliding security doors should be used in areas which house high-risk prisoners. These doors, they note, are less likely to be used by prisoner to hurt themselves or staff. Others suggest that the doors are expensive, noisy and contribute to the institutional atmosphere (increasing stress and disorientation). A useful tool for examining the physical environment is contained in the new NIC suicide prevention curriculum.

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Finally, some managers believe that they can "suicide-proof" their facilities through physical methods. We suggest that it is only a combination of operations and the physical plant that reduces (not eliminates) the likelihood of prisoner suicide.

ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES

A variety of administrative practices are necessary to develop and maintain suicide prevention efforts. Written policies and procedures should address all aspects of facility operation and should form the basis for staff training efforts.

Permanent shift logs, incident reports and other forms of documentation should be maintained throughout the facility. Procedures should ensure that staff read and analyze logs and reports that provide information about prisoners and their behavior.

When a prisoner is transferred, documentation of his/her behavior, problems and needs should be provided to the receiving institution.

All suicides and attempts should be investigated and the results should be compared carefully. A psychological autopsy can be performed for each suicide victim.

Internal inspections and monitoring should ensure compliance with policies and procedures and with applicable standards. External inspections can provide independent assessments of compliance with standards and codes.

CONCLUSION

Broad-based research has identified some areas of disagreement among professional involved with suicide prevention, but also there are significant areas of agreement, including:

- *preventing prisoner suicide demands a continuing, comprehensive and coordinated effort, embracing operations with the physical setting;

- *it is not possible to "suicide-proof" any facility, because suicide prevention demands a carefully designed physical setting and ongoing operational efforts;

- *a "profile" of the typical suicide-prone prisoner cannot accurately be provided, and attempting to create a profile can create a false sense of security among staff;

- *electronic surveillance and monitoring is not a substitute for the efforts of staff who come into direct contact with prisoners on a continuing basis;

- *the selection of appropriate detention/corrections staff is an area requiring additional attention in many facilities, and ongoing staff evaluation efforts must be improved; and

- *additional efforts must be made to decrease the level of prisoner stress, uncertainty and disorientation and to increase the predictability of the detention/corrections environment through operational methods (orientation, classification, communication) and physical plant improvements (design, interior arrangement, selection of materials and furnishings).

In addition to these general areas of agreement, the authors identified some issues which continue to generate disagreement in the field:

- Can prisoners be safely and effectively used to help prevent suicides?
- Should prisoners be placed in double-occupancy cells to reduce the likelihood of suicide?
- Should prisoners be asked directly if they are considering, or have considered committing suicide?

These, and other questions will be answered as the field of detention and corrections continues to address the problem of prisoner suicide.

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 the annual jail inspection.

SUBJECT: SPECIAL NEEDS INMATE - VI

NAME _____

NUMBER: 70

DATE _____

1. Environmental improvements contribute to suicide prevention efforts.

TRUE FALSE

2. Electronic monitoring can take the place of direct observation for staff supervision of inmates.

TRUE FALSE

3. Through physical alterations, a cell can be made "suicide-proof."

TRUE FALSE

4. Suicide "profiles" are foolproof.

TRUE FALSE

5. Placing suicide-prone inmates in double-occupancy cells is a good idea.

- A. True
- B. Usually False
- C. Unknown at this time
- D. Great idea, it saves bed space

CREDIT: 1 HOUR CREDIT FOR JAIL INSERVICE TRAINING REQUIREMENT

ANSWER SHEET SHOULD BE RETAINED BY JAIL ADMINISTRATOR OR TRAINING OFFICER

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