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Inmates Find Privileges on Cutting Edge of Jails

Justice: Santa Ana officials say cable TV and fresh coffee help maintain discipline. Critics deride facility as 'glamour slammer.'

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SANTA ANA — With carpeting, cable television and views of the city, module 3-C in the new Santa Ana City Jail may be as comfortable as it gets for someone facing charges of drug possession.

The comfort level at the jail and the unarmed officer who mingles with inmates throughout the day and night are not there by accident.

Officials who run the \$40-million jail, part of the city's \$107-million police facility that opened in January, believe that inmates will behave well if they establish a bond with their jailers and are given amenities such as fresh coffee and access to computers.

Critics, including local residents and officials, have a laundry list of terms for such jails: "glamour slammers," "jail Hilton," and "country club jails" that do little to deliver justice.

Former mayoral candidate John Raya said inmates at the jail are being treated too gently and that the amenities they enjoy are a waste of taxpayers' money.

"Jails should be stark," said Raya, a longtime critic of the jail. "There are decent, hard-working, law-abiding citizens in Santa Ana who cannot afford cable television."

Jail administrator Russell M. Davis said he has heard it all before and that treating inmates with respect will pay off with fewer disturbances.

"If you want to control behavior, you have to have things you can take away," said Davis, a nationally recognized authority on the administration of jails. "If you lock someone in a cell and say behave yourself or else, what else are you going to do?"

Santa Ana jail officials follow a management practice called direct supervision in which detention officers work side by side with inmates. The philosophy behind the practice includes offering a variety of perks for inmates. If inmates don't follow the rules, they may lose the privileges.

After four months, Santa Ana jail officials report no major incidents.

Of some 3,400 jails in the country, about 250 are listed as using the new management technique, said Tom Reid, a program specialist with the National Institute of Corrections in Colorado, a branch of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Some experts said the new method, which was pioneered by the federal government in the late 1970s, has become so popular that jail officials who do not practice the method claim to do so to improve public relations.

Even though inmates are treated differently from traditional jails, inmates in module 3-C recently said the Santa Ana Jail still has a way to go.

The inmates complained, some bitterly, of the quality of the food, and also of the high phone bills and the lack of a law library.

But they acknowledged that the surroundings were pretty nice.

"This isn't prison," said John Solis, 51, who is facing charges of drug possession. "This is the A-ride at Disneyland."

Jail officials acknowledge that there is room for improvement with the food but add that the phone rates are fair and that a CD-ROM law library will be delivered in about a month. Davis said the cable television is paid with proceeds from telephone calls and the jail's general store.

"It costs the city nothing," Davis said.

Besides the amenities, the architecture of the jail itself differs from others.

In traditional jails, cells are arranged in rows and officers monitor the inmates from a booth or from a guard station.

In the new jail, up to 64 inmates are placed in modules patrolled 24 hours a day by officers working 12-hour shifts. Inmate cells are located in a semicircular pattern around a central meeting area that serves as a dining hall, recreation room and lounge. Inmates also have access to an indoor exercise area. There are 32 double-bunked inmate cells in each of the seven general population modules. One area is designated as a lock-down for problem inmates.

The morning for inmates begins at 6:15 a.m., when they are awakened for breakfast. They can move around the module, read books, watch television or play dominoes until 11 p.m. The modules include three color televisions, 10 telephones and a conference room with a computer that eventually will house the CD-ROM law library.

In addition to the module concept, the officers are the other main component of the new management philosophy. They are given special training in working with inmates, officials said. Officers are assigned three-month periods on modules such as 3-C and then they are transferred to other areas of the jail.

In addition to patrolling the inmates, an officer's job is to befriend them. That way, the officer can better predict when there is tension and head off a

confrontation, Davis said.

Officer Louis Quezada, who was patrolling module 3-C recently, said he gets along with the inmates.

"We respect them, they respect us," he said.

Quezada said the worst incident he has seen was a fight between two inmates; it was quickly broken up.

"They're here every day, having the same routine. It can get very aggravating [for the inmates]," he said.

Officers, Quezada said, have to be patient and communicate with the inmates.

Jail officials in other counties say they are hesitant to have officers mingling with inmates for safety reasons. They also contend that they save taxpayers money because one guard can monitor more inmates than under the Santa Ana method.

Santa Ana City Councilman Ted R. Moreno criticized the method used at the jail and said that when crimes are committed certain privileges should be taken away.

Moreno said he is skeptical of the overall jail management and predicted that it was easier for inmates to start fights because of limited supervision.

He said management at the jail will not change "until there's some type of incident."

But Councilwoman Patricia A. McGuigan supported the management technique and the layout of the new jail.

"It makes sense," McGuigan said. "If you degrade people, if you put them down, they're going to stay down."