

Inside The Box

A Prisoner Tells His Tale

By Matthew Hattley

Maximum to Medium Security: A Step Closer to Home?



Matthew Hattley

After spending the past twenty years in various maximum security facilities, I was finally transferred to my first medium security facility in January — Woodbourne C.F. I'm still in the process of adjusting to my new environment; this will require several more months.

In fact, my classification decreased from maximum to medium security back in 2012. However, it took almost two years for me to be physically transferred. Even with a fair disciplinary record — my last misbehavior report was written in July 2006 for not having my state identification card on my person (a minor infraction) — I received 14 days loss of commissary and packages.

I'm sure that the delay of my transfer came down to two factors: First, the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) refuses to transfer all medium security prisoners for fear of having one or more maximum security prisons placed in jeopardy of being closed for not operating at its intended capacity (there are currently over two hundred prisoners at Eastern C.F. alone — about 25 percent of the population — who are medium status). Second, the Board of Parole continues to deny parole to eligible prisoners for the "nature of their crime" (something that will never change) regardless of their accomplishments and growth while incarcerated — giving them an additional two years before their next scheduled parole hearing. Some prisoners have had more than ten hearings before eventual release.

In essence, the more prisoners denied parole, the less empty beds in the prisons. This also produces a blockage in the system, with the "mediums" jammed full because prisoners who should be paroled are still incarcerated. Mediums were designed to rotate the population back into society on a regular basis, not warehouse us indefinitely.

So now that I'm actually in a medium security prison, there are many things that concern me. For instance, if DOCCS is supposed to support family and community ties

(see their website) then why are medium security prisoners only allowed to receive one visit per weekend and on holidays? In a maximum security prison you can receive visits seven days a week. In here, just on weekends, even though the closer we come to being released back into society the more we need our family and friends for their support.

Again, where programs are concerned, they are damned close to non-existent here. Being that the majority of the population already completed the "required" programs while in a "max," we are simply offered "porter" positions upon our arrival. How is this going to assist us upon our release? This is definitely an issue that needs attention at the state government level.

Personally, I was under the impression that I would get the chance to acquire more skills here than in a "max." Eastern C.F. really spoiled me with their various program options. Unless individuals are able to get into the Bard College program here, the options are extremely limited — which is disappointing. More relevant programs are required; prisoners need to acquire and maintain employable skills before release. A successful transition back into society depends on this.

Woodbourne is unique in the sense that it offers both single cells and 57-person dorms. I spent seventeen days in a dorm. While there, I was introduced to sleep deprivation; nothing in the past two decades of prison had prepared me for such living conditions. Picture a six foot by five and a half foot area closed only on three sides by four foot walls of wood. You can literally see the people across from you. I have a newfound respect for those who are able to adjust and endure those conditions, especially for extended periods of time; some of them have been there for over five years.

I managed to transfer to a cell. Now, unfortunately, dorms and cell areas are not operated equally; the dorms allow much more freedom of movement. In fact, to a degree, the cell blocks are operated like maximum security facilities, and they are locked down by 11 p.m. every night. But I have no problem trading off a few extra hours of movement for some solitude.

Still, the primary question for me remains the same: I may have made it to a medium security facility, but optimism is fragile. My fate lies in the hands of three parole commissioners, and they may or may not take into account my achievements and growth throughout my incarceration. I have to wonder, where's the justice in that?

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