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Squander 101:

A required corrections officer academy class?

By

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My introduction to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) prison system followed a lengthy stretch in a Club Fed penitentiary near Los Angeles. The difference between federal and state time is like departing a Hawaiian vacation and stepping into an Amazonian jungle without food, water or a weapon.

Indoctrination into Governor Swarzenegger's penal system required my spending six months in Administrative Segregation (AdSeg) at a desolate desert pen. With business management and food service supervisory background, I had nothing better to do so observed the operations of the 100-cell (160+ inmates), 2-tier isolation block. I became a fly-on-the-wall in AdSeg; along with spatters of foodstuffs, unidentifiable dried liquid products, boogers and spittle. I peered out the narrow window centered in my solid steel

door and saw a steady hemorrhaging of state funds caused by olive-drab-clothed corrections officers, and other staff. The same gross depletion of state assets and time abuses I saw in AdSeg consistently matched employee actions at other state prisons as if one of the classes provided at the Correctional Officer's Academy was Squander 101. Some seemed to specialize in the intentional abuse of resources.

Manpower Abuses:

AdSeg staffing was 6 officers, including a sergeant. The inmates were locked down 24/7 with the only release for necessary appointments (medical/dental/hearings) and escort to 2-3 showers per week (always in handcuffs, one at a time). The full complement of officers was busy when feeding us, taking less than an hour to dispense, then collect trays and clean up twice a day. A sack lunch was provided with breakfast. For two hours a day all six officers were busy. Showering us all took four officers about two hours 2-3 times per week. The rest of their shift's time (averaging 5 hours per day, times two shifts) consisted of sitting around, talking, sleeping in the offices, and an occasional escort job taking one of us out to a visit or to keep an appointment. On Sundays, the dayroom TV set was tuned in to football from 9 AM to 5 PM and the party atmosphere reminded me of a sports bar, minus the alcohol. The staff members, averaging \$30-per-hour, got paid for watching football. Much of the time, yard officers wandered in, shorting the active yard assignment to monitor mainline prisoners, just outside, and we had up to 10 on-duty officers sucking up a failing state's budget monies.

I suppose corrections officers are hired to mimic a fire department: they are present and on-duty, like firefighters, in case an emergency arises. It could be a fight between

two guys (like a vehicle fire) to a fair-sized battle between 20 inmates (similar to a commercial building blaze requiring a 2nd or 3rd alarm). Regardless, AdSeg could easily survive with just two officers during the bulk of the 2nd and 3rd Watch shifts, with yard officers coming in to assist with feeding chores. I lived under these circumstances for many months and was horrified by the lack of insight by this prison's supervisory staff. Absolute lethargy seemed the standard for these people. If a business manager or efficiency expert took over scheduling at any prison, realizing hundreds of thousands of dollars in savings annually would result.

Later in my state prison term, I found myself active in various leisure time and support groups where I mingled with inmates working directly with staff in yard administrative offices. One of the convicts was tasked with logging staff absences for official CDCR documents such as the Daily Activity Report. Knowing my feelings about CDCR wastage, the friend brought me a few copies of the documents. One of these files revealed the gross abuse of the various coded "leaves of absence" used by staff. Two officers used every excuse available (bereavement, sick leave, personal time, etc.) to pile up over 50 days off EACH for just the first six months of one year. Sick-leave abuses were prolific with two related officers always contracting an unknown malady the day before or the day after the regular days off. This ensured them a three-day weekend several times a month. My inmate buddy found it so amusing he started charting the sick-leave usage on days of the local (within 100 miles) sports home-game schedule. A home football event showed a huge spike of "blue flu" on that Sunday; a similar up-tick for home baseball games. Yard lockdowns were routine on home-game days so the inmates planned for these periods. Just prior to these events, and while in

hearing distance of inmates, staff members habitually asked fellow workers if they were "in" on the charter bus taking staff to these home game's stadiums. Supervisory staff is not only aware of these "absences" they participated in them. If such sickness/leave misuse occurred in any civilian workplace, heads would roll. Not in the CDCR. I often joked with officers known for participating in these sports-event-leave treks and they naively confirmed they were "in" on the events, fully aware there was no oversight, and not caring inmates were aware of their deception – what arrogance. My observations are on just the one yard but I know this is not an isolated instance; other inmates concur this happens throughout the CDCR. I believe if the CDCR hired a few experienced efficiency experts, and granted them authority to expose these abuses, millions of dollars in savings would result. The good-old-boy network is alive and well in California state prison correctional staff.

State Supplies:

Waste of state supplies happens in front of me every day. In less than three months in AdSeg, I watched as inmate work crews traipsed in and waxed the concrete floors. Over 10,000 square feet of durable jail floor space was stripped and waxed, apparently just to please a sergeant who used to be in the military and liked the shine. How many people wax their garage? Does anybody wax and polish their warehouse flooring? Waxing inevitably begs re-waxing when the old coat starts to wear off—why not leave the bare concrete as is, never requiring any more expensive coats of wax, let alone the expense of a stripper, too. I saw this senseless action taking place at every state prison I wandered through: until the state deficit reached several billion dollars in about 2008. Staff never seemed to care.

At Wasco SP, we were showered three times per week, whether we needed it or not. Each time they racked our doors, four of us trudged to the 4-head shower stall after receiving one bar of soap each – each day. Partially-used bars of soap littered the shower floor as we bathed. Most inmates threw their old (two-days-old) bar on the floor and used the new one. Some of us used the old soap and turned down the new issue, but the majority hoarded the loot or disposed of the still-usable provision. Once during my 3-month stay at Wasco, an officer had an epiphany of economy and physically broke the new bars in half, providing two inmates while dispensing only one bar! I thought this was effectiveness but soon realized the officer was too lazy to walk to the nearby storeroom and get another box of soap.

Plastic bags are another commodity I watched disappear daily. In AdSeg, as well as in normal housing unit use throughout the California prison system, 30-gallon size plastic bags are utilized for lining trash cans, but also in packing up inmate belongings for cell moves, securing old clothing piled in trash areas for transport to the laundry, wrapping confiscated “evidence” from rules violations, used as “water-bags” for in-cell weightlifting, and covering dayroom tables during cell feeding. Designed for one-time use, a typical trash bag probably costs the CDCR all of 5¢ each, maybe more. My observations showed 80% of trash bag uses were easily replaced with a much sturdier mesh laundry bag, similar to the concept of civilian customers providing their own reusable cloth bags for groceries. Got a cell move? Give the inmate a couple of cloth laundry bags, turn them in when done, and send them to the laundry for re-washing/re-use. Used clothing piled in a corner? Use a damn laundry bag that can have a life expectancy of years – not waste a plastic bag with a one-use life. As anal retentive as it

sounds, I occasionally counted the number of plastic trash bags I saw dispensed that I knew would be thrown away after one use. I did not count trash can lining. Forty-four bags went out for just AdSeg one day; 51 another time. If it costs only a nickel for one bag, that expense is less than \$2.00 per day...but that is only one housing unit. Multiply that figure times one prison (20 housing units?), times the number of facilities in the state of California. I would be willing to bet several CDCR officer positions could be funded each year by simply mandating reusable/recyclable mesh laundry bags for specific tasks; more positions if the bags cost more than 5¢. A very small concern, but the typical corrections officer or prison staff member has no experience or insight to see the overall hemorrhaging in the prison's budget might well be staunchened by examination of such unnecessary consumption by their co-workers.

As a sidebar to the plastic bag issue, add the following example of lack of staff oversight: AdSeg typically suffers from a shortage of reading material with only bi-weekly library issuance of book loans to us. When a number of library paperbacks went missing, the AdSeg staff shrugged their shoulders and said the inmates were passing loaned books around and they could not check every cell for books – that was the province of civilian library staff. Shortly, an unruly occupant of AdSeg was removed from his cell and his cubicle searched for contraband. Inside, the officers found two plastic trash bags, each containing 15-20 paperback novels. The bags also contained several gallons of water, soaking/destroying the library books to add mass for the in-cell weightlifting exercises since he was allowed no yard. The ruined books disappeared and the intractable inmate went unpunished, his only “real” violation the use of the water-bags in his cell, not destruction of state property.

While on a lengthy lockdown on a mainline yard, we were fed in our cells in the two-tier facility and supplies delivered by officers once a week. Staff used a heavy-duty, molded plastic 4-wheeled cart, about the size of a small desk, to distribute toilet paper and paper towels. One officer, working alone several weeks into the lockdown, angrily dispensed our TP, refusing to answer questions at each door on the upper tier, obviously not happy about working alone. As he reached the final cell, he turned around, shoved the gray cart and it struck the railing loudly, careening on the slick (waxed!) concrete floor like an out-of-control NASCAR racer. He liked that so much he then propelled the cart off the landing and down the 22-step steel staircase. It struck once, sheared off one of the casters, and leaped up like a boulder crashing down a steep granite precipice, pushing off the stairs and landing against a stainless steel table with a bang. Despite the sturdiness of the hard plastic, one leg of the device tore away, taking another caster with it. Probably a \$50-\$75 product, the now-useless cart lay against a wall by the telephones for another week before its unceremonious deposit in a "hot trash" dumpster. A replacement cart soon arrived but the officer continued his abusive ways – usually taking out his frustrations on helpless inmates.

Serving 4-ounce cartons of juice (apple, orange, etc.) with breakfast in the dining hall checked off one of the RDA guideline requirements the CDCR must follow for inmate fruit/vegetable rations. Great...but for at least three years the juices presented to us on our morning tray were FROZEN. Lethargic kitchen staff did not have the foresight to take the juices out of the freezer/refrigerator and allow them to thaw before serving. Sometimes the crates of juices were taken out by 4:30 AM, but remained stacked and most of the cartons stayed solid ice. We cannot take juices out of the dining facility – all

food must be consumed before leaving. As a result, at least 60%-70% of the juices were thrown away, six days a week. Serving still-green, inedible bananas was another favorite of kitchen staff; hundreds of pounds of bananas fed to the local pig population. It does not take an economics professor to figure the monetary loss over the many years this went on and, no doubt, continues to occur here and at other facilities.

Electricity/lighting Consumption:

At Wasco State Prison, in 2007, I found myself in a reception center where staff shocked me with their complacency. The remote facility was on a septic tank system. I knew this because the suction-emptying of some of the 20,000 gallon (each) sewage/waste water holding tanks took place just 50 feet from our housing unit – we watched the procedure at least twice a week. Our canteen shopping day occasionally corresponded with the nearby pumping and the stink was horrendous. The expense of calling out a number of 7,500 gallon capacity big rigs several times a week is not cheap, but staff seemed oblivious of such expenses coming out of the CDCR's budget, as evidenced by the following incident: Cell toilets flush efficiently, using about 3 gallons per flush that unfortunately sounds like a 747 departing LAX. At least 2-3 times a week at Wasco, a cell toilet flushing mechanism sticks on and the inmate must shout out to get the floor officer's attention to unlock the chase door and re-set the flusher – at about 25-30 gallons per minute. Such a situation at night may require a 10-15 minute delay to accomplish the shut-down, depending on how sluggish the officers are.

On one fine Saturday, we were released for the hour-long yard session at about 9:30 AM. One of the departing inmates took a quick leak and as the doors clattered open, he called out that his toilet flush was stuck – everybody in the building heard the flushing,

including the three floor officers monitoring our release. When we returned 55 minutes later, this toilet remained in full-flush mode, wasting at least 1000–1500 gallons of precious water in the desert-like atmosphere of the San Joaquin Valley. Not only was the water wasted, the flow all went into the septic tank where this lapse in judgment by CDCR officers probably required a premature visit by the local septic system vendor who realized a tidy profit for taking an additional suck-job at Wasco. I saw this same wastage at all of the state prisons I visited. I do not know if all were on a septic system, but either way, water resources dissipated.

While on the subject of resource conservation, consider electricity, a sizable expense for every prison, with required 24/7 lighting and electric perimeter fencing for security. I am sure the general public wants such safety measures, but take a closer look at the consumption I saw while keeping track of such things by writing on my single-cell wall in AdSeg. Outside my narrow cell window, just 100 yards away, I viewed a 5-acre staff/visitor parking lot. On weekdays the parking lot was at near capacity; almost all five acres used. After 5 PM, about 60% is used when the high-intensity security lights automatically turn dark into day, daytime staff goes home, and the Second Watch staff is already on-duty. After 10 PM, about 10% of this pasture of pavement is occupied by cars and trucks of the graveyard shift. Why do the other four acres need lights on? A roving security patrol prowls the lots all night and manned guard towers are overlooking the parking area until dawn. Turn most of the damn lights off; simple.

Between cells in most 180° and 270° configuration housing units in California, there are pipe chase/plumbing access rooms with 60-watt lights. At any given time, 50% of the lights are burning in these seldom accessed cubicles. Over a Thanksgiving holiday

week, I saw the lights and one computer left on in a counselor's office from Friday at noon, until the following Thursday when someone finally showed up. Floor officers and other visiting staff used this office every day the lights burned – nobody turned anything off. Mentioning the obvious personal-phone-call abuses I saw in that office over the 6-day period, seems like overkill.

The 10,000 square-foot dayroom areas of these housing units are illuminated by at least 30 high-intensity light fixtures. On a sunny day, windows alone provide plenty of light to the dayroom area. A light or two over the floor officer's podium is all that is required in this vast venue. I believe these facilities were actually built with electricity cost-saving in mind, since during several daytime blackouts, there was excellent light in the building with just the window illumination. With no active cost efficiency expert appointed at any prison I know of, apathetic employees ignore these day-to-day violations adding up to a tremendous burden on taxpayers.

Random Drug Testing

While in CDCR state prisons, I was selected for random drug testing once a year; sometimes twice. I have no drug convictions, no drug revelations in any pre-sentence report, and no write-ups for drugs while in custody or as a civilian – none. My cohorts in the test waiting area revealed over 40% with no, or no recent drug violations. With a half-dozen clean results from these random analyses over the years, nobody ever purged me from the list. The cost?: at least \$50-\$75 per drug test (plus the manpower/supplies drain). No staff person ever thought to check and see if those on the random drug test list ever had any narcotics violations in their background, let alone a clean history for each of their subsequent analyses. With a recent slowdown in random drug

testing at my current facility, there might actually be someone looking into this program – or maybe the laboratories are refusing the questionable state checks written in payment for their services recently; CDCR payments are notoriously late to outside vendors.

The few examples cited by me in this article are verifiable since everything is documented and applies throughout the 32-prison system. Examination of the sick leave and manpower issues alone, by an independent outside authority, might get the attention of members of the strongest union in the state – the California Correctional Peace Officers Association. Letting these people continue sends the entire system down a road leading California into inevitable bankruptcy.