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Essay for The American Prison Writing Archive

by

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SOLEDAD

The official name of Soledad Prison is Correctional Training Facility (CTF). Located in Soledad, California, this prison was built in 1946 but is far from being run like the 72-year-old institution it is. One would think that such a mature facility would have worked out all the challenges necessary to run a prison efficiently and proficiently by now, yet this is not at all what we experience here day in and day out. I've been here 8 years 4 months so far and I've been a witness to what transpires when there is a lack of leadership, a lack of learning from the past, and a lack of concern for how the current conditions are negatively affecting the inmate population. Though to be fair, the problems here are reflected in all of the almost three dozen prisons throughout the state. Prison management in California has reached a state of crisis and it will be a very long time before the California Department of Corrections (CDCR) finally addresses

the issues that plague our institutions. They have bigger fish to fry at the moment, so the real problems within our prisons will have to wait until CDCR's internal affairs get resolved. That's how things are done: never address today that which you can put off until it gets worse later.

The State's main prison-generated crises have been overcrowding and increased costs due to that overcrowding. The State had long lost its ability to afford the cost of incarcerating so many of its citizens; and the overcrowding situation got so out of hand that health care for such an explosion of inmates became an impossible task. Inmates were actually dying because of it. This led to a lawsuit which led to a 20-year battle by the courts to get the State to reduce the crowding and improve health care. Meanwhile, budget cuts were necessary to meet the State's many other needs, so they did as they've always done: cut funding for schools and public services and other vital assets. Nothing was sacred.

In such an environment, it was perfectly natural that the legislators began to balk at cutting yet more funding to yet more public services and schools when so much money was being spent on prisons. This was at a time when the prison problem was at the peak of its financial burden. The population in the prisons had reached about 170,000 and the county courthouses were overwhelmed with processing so many convictions. All down the line every facet of law enforcement and corrections was burdened by the mass incarceration problem. Everyone from the police and sheriffs and probation and parole to the courts and jails were

all struggling under the strain and forced to eat up more of the money that could have been going to schools and public services.

It finally came to pass that the California prison system found its finances cut by the legislators despite the pressure of overcrowding and the lack of adequate health care. Although the cutbacks were an understandable thing to do, the actual implementation of them proved to be poorly thought out. One result of the cuts was the reduction of staff and correctional officers. This affected CDCR's inmate to officer ratio which in turn brought about what were known as rolling lockdowns to reduce the amount of inmates present at any given time on the yards in order to balance that ratio. To this end, we were only allowed program (yard, packages, canteen, library, phones, clothing exchange, etc.) every other day, or depending on the prison, there would be an alternating schedule for certain buildings at certain times of the day where we either got morning program or afternoon program depending on our particular building's rotation in the overall schedule. This new policy had a disastrous effect on prisons like CTF because everything necessary for existing in prison is reliant on access to the services that provide the things we need.

If you don't have access to the yard, you cannot access the services that are only available there. One example is the clothing room which is only open two days a week. If you need to exchange your worn out clothes or boots or shoes or jacket, it is necessary to be able to get to the yard to access that service. But with an every-other-day program or alternating half-day

program, access to that service depends on landing on just the right day when it is open and when the down-day rotation allows access to the yard. Similarly, to get to the phone to call your family, or to go to the prison commissary known as canteen or store to purchase the items needed for daily living, or to go to the library to research law for a criminal appeal, or to access any of the other vital services upon which prison existence depends, are all reliant on access to the yard.

So with everything so dependent on a functioning program in order to access critical services, any limitation on the prison's program creates an increased strain on the lives of the inmates who rely on the services that are tightly controlled to begin with. For you see, we are prisoners, and as such, the services we need are only made available to us at certain times on certain days according to the schedules set by the powers-that-be. Thus, we have no control over the matter when it comes to what services are available to us or when we may have access to them.

Knowing this, you would think that the powers-that-be would alter the schedules to accommodate the shortages of staff and down-days due to the funding cuts which have disrupted so much of prison life across the state. Instead, they expect us to just accept the limitations and make due. Any request for fairness or understanding is met with the same answer: the safety and security of the institution dictates policy -- not an inmate's needs.

They refuse to acknowledge that any interference or disruption of the already-limited services we need is detrimental

to our well being. And yes, it is understandable that the reader of this essay may care less about a convicted criminal's well-being, but I assure you that it does matter. Most of us will be released one day and it is in everyone's best interest to not create men who are bitter about their prison stay. Those who feel mistreated throughout their sentence harbor resentment and are more likely to re-offend upon their release than those whose environment was conducive to rehabilitation and deemed by them to have been humane.

Perhaps my use of the word humane when discussing prisoners is offensive to the reader as well since punishment for crime might be viewed as necessarily including a certain level of inhumane treatment to correct the offender's behavior, but after decades of this practice we must conclude that it has not proven effective. The point of this essay has been to make you aware of the fact that humane treatment of inmates along with rehabilitative programming better prepares a man for a successful parole. I mention this because the current conditions in all of California's prisons are inhumane and even border on cruel. Our environment breeds contempt and instills a cynical view of corrections and even of society itself in the average inmate. The average inmate already feels disenfranchised from the outside world as it is, so it is imperative that his or her stay in prison does not exacerbate that sentiment. There are so many decades of experience to learn from and so much information at our dispose from which better policies and better prison management practices can be formed. This crisis doesn't have to

persist. There are sensible solutions.

Here in Soledad, so much of a difference could be made with better resource management practices. But as inmates, our concerns and our attempts to offer insight from our perspective are regularly disregarded. That is where perhaps the American Prison Writing Archive can be of use. It can give us a voice; a voice which has been suppressed to the detriment of all the stakeholders -- inmates, citizens, and CDCR staff alike. The consequences of poor management are collateral. One thing affects another, and that other affects yet more others. We all have skin in the game here. The consequences of getting it wrong have been disastrous.

Getting back to my previous discussion, about five or so years ago Soledad moved from a rolling lockdown practice to a policy of declaring medical transports. This practice redirected what staff we did have for running a limited operational program and utilized those staff to escort inmates to the hospital for unscheduled appointments. That is, anyone requiring a trip to the hospital for which they did not have an appointment. That could be for emergencies or for emergent circumstances which are not within the prison's medical ability to treat immediately. And with 5,000 plus inmates, there are several of these trips a day. Furthermore, the prison redirects two staff for each transport which forces a yard recall and complete shutdown of program for the affected yard. We have four yards: A, B, C, and D. When medical transports occur the shutdowns are sequential. It goes

from A to B to C then D so as to share the burden. Sometimes there are so many medical transports that all of the yards are down at the same time. We all suffer four or more of these a week. And we sometimes get two of these in a day. We get shut down for 2nd watch and 3rd watch. Second watch is from 6:00 am to 2:00 pm, and 3rd watch is from 2:00 to 10:00 pm. It fully screws our day. No canteen, no packages, no library, no clothing, no phones, nothing.

CDCR was desperately short of staff as it was, so there wasn't even one staff member to spare for a single medical transport, but mismanagement redirects the staff needed for keeping the prison's program running to fill the positions which should have their own staff for something so important as a hospital run. A properly managed prison meets its medical obligations without having to shut the prison down. If there are no less-vital staff to redirect, then a serious reconsideration of funding for staffing levels needs to be made, because for this to have gone on for years is ridiculous. The practice has had catastrophic consequences and are going to continue for many more years until the mismanagement is finally brought to an end.

Every time the program is shut down, the anger and stress generated in the inmate population threatens the safety and security of the institution. The inmates harbor resentment toward the staff and become enraged with the conditions of their confinement. Moreover, this rage carries over into inmate interactions and breeds contempt among the population. Fights between cellmates, fights in the cell blocks, fights within

dorms, fights on the yard, and at workplaces are manifestations of anger over not having access to the things we need.

There are 1,200 men on just this one yard alone and we all have a need to call our families, to go to the store to get the hygiene items and other things for living, to research in the library for our legal cases, to exchange our worn out laundry, or collect the care packages our families have sent us. But limited programming due to mismanagement and staff shortages and constant medical transports shutting down what program we do have puts a strain on the services that are strained to begin with. When the yard finally opens, hundreds of us pour out into the yard to fill the store, package, library, clothing, and phone lines. The lines are extremely long and the time remaining in the day is so short that many do not make it to the end. They have to return and try again another day. Every day that the yard is made available to us, we stand for hours in the longest lines you've ever seen. We're all desperate to talk to our families or to get access to the services that bring relief, and we have such little access to those services and yard time that it brings out the worst in the already temperamentally challenged prison population. Desperate men start cutting in line and complaining and arguing and then fistfighting over favorable positions in line. If a guy can save himself two hours in a line through bullying or predation he does so. This never goes over well with the rest of us who then make an issue of it. And prison being prison, one fight escalates into two or three more or even a riot due to the politics of prison being such that others always jump in when they see a

circumstance involving someone they know. These volatile situations carry over into the buildings, into the cells, into the dorms, and into the workplaces.

The desperation to get access to the services we need is compounded by the fact that the yard can be recalled at any moment, thus rendering hours of line standing a waste of all of our time. It sometimes takes days of line standing to finally reach the end. It's nothing to have 10 or more hours invested into something like going to canteen over a process of several days of yard recalls and delayed programming due to all the disruptions derived from staff shortages. The frustration of it all breeds a hostile living environment. Everyone is always on edge and always prepared to bleed if need be to not be one of the hundreds who will not make it to the end of one of the many ridiculously long lines. Fistfighting over positions in line is a way of life in the era of resource mismanagement. And those fights lead to more fights and risk riots or small melees. We've had two of those melees over the phones in the last few years and too many fistfights to count. The hostility between us all is constant because the stress over the limited program is constant. We're all forced into competition against one another for access to the services we need, and we all resent that.

Being put in this predicament by CDCR and its staff has created animosity towards staff which adds another negative element to our prison environment. No one wants to cooperate with anything CDCR attempts to implement for personal betterment because they resent the conditions of their confinement. We are

in an era when rehabilitative programming is being introduced to attempt to reduce recidivism but few care to invest themselves in the process and get anything out of it. The anger and frustration over the conditions of our confinement negates any attempts by CDCR to guide us into a more positive direction. The inmate population feels that they must be met halfway. The average inmate feels that CDCR cannot have it both ways. That is to say that CDCR cannot force inmates into a daily struggle for survival and expect them to accommodate CDCR's goals. CDCR's current policies and practices help create the recidivism that they now would prefer to reduce. CDCR's policies and practices instill anger, frustration, and hatred in the hearts of the men who are confined in such a hostile environment.

The policies and practices need to change and an environment conducive to rehabilitation needs to be developed. When you treat men fairly you earn respect, and respect is the currency of the common man. You cannot convince a man to consider your position without first winning his respect. If CDCR plans to ever make a real impact and convince convicted criminals to consider a different lifestyle, they will need to find a way to earn the respect of the men they hope to convince. But after decades of mismanagement, the prospects for real change are grim. They would have to care about an inmate's well-being. They would have to completely change the way the entire California prison system is run. That's probably decades away, if ever at all, but pages like this and projects like this are an effort toward that end.

Meanwhile, the few hours of yard we will be given today will be spent in lines like the one for laundry, where after several hours of line standing and dealing with the chaos and drama that ensues from the frustration over these practices, it will again be learned that the clothing room is out of towels and the most common sizes of shoes and pants and boxers and shirts. It sometimes takes a month of weekly laundry-line standing to finally be able to get a few clothing items in your size, though more often than not the items end up being stained and threadbare due to years of use by others. They tell us that's the way it is. The State is broke, they say, and cannot afford to properly clothe the inmate population. The story is the same for every facet of prison life. The buildings are falling apart because there are no funds to repair them; our ceilings leak, our windows are busted out, the toilets and sinks are in disrepair because the plumbing is in disrepair, the electrical system constantly fails and requires patches, the mattresses are flat and stained, the sheets are ripped and stained and full of holes, there's no toilet in the dayrooms, no sink or soap or water to wash your hands after urinating, the heater in the winter always fails and the air in the summer is nonexistent. Staff always tells us that there's just no resources to address these issues. Over 600 men have filed grievances over the medical transport issue alone, but not one found traction because CDCR doesn't have the funds to solve any of the problems even if they wanted to. Numerous lawsuits have been filed as well, but the courts cannot squeeze blood out of a turnip by forcing CDCR to come up with funds it

does not have to fix the problems. CDCR also downplays the conditions of our confinement in such court filings and they always claim they are doing the best with what they have. So we never get anywhere in our quest for humane living conditions.

I've been working in the kitchen here for three years now and the situation there is as dismal as the rest of the prison is. Years of neglect, mismanagement, and lack of resources have created frighteningly unsafe and unsanitary conditions. We have several hand-sanitizer dispensers but they are almost never filled. We are allotted two refill bags a month which last maybe two days each and then we are without. From then on men use the bathroom and return to handle food and the items that food is prepared in, having only rinsed their hands in water. Norovirus is a yearly occurrence for us all and gets so bad and spreads so fast that the prison gets put on a quarantine lockdown until the illness plays itself out. Sometimes a few weeks to a month or more of no inmate movement plays out. Such lockdowns add to the stress and frustration of the inmate population because by the time the lockdown is over everyone is even more desperate for the services, resulting in even longer lines and more chaos and more resentment. Ever had norovirus? It's no picnic itself. It comes with explosive diarrhea and vomiting among other disturbing symptoms, but the most disturbing thing for a man living in a cell is the fact that both cellmates will contract this disease because of cross-contamination of common areas and lead to a situation where both men must fight for a position on the toilet or compromise and each share one buttcheek on the seat. Both men

must spend several days this way, unable to leave the safety of the seat for very long. A plastic bag serves to catch the simultaneous vomiting, if one is so lucky to locate a few bags. It's not like there's a line one can stand in to buy bags. They are considered contraband and as such are confiscated when found, so you have to be creative to get them and keep them for days like this. A man does so much vomiting and has so much diarrhea while being unable to eat or drink over the next few days that he becomes convinced that he is going to die. Very few men are able to endure the symptoms and resist the instinct to panic and not report their illness to medical. In a man's panicked mind, he is convinced he cannot survive another day of vomiting and diarrhea or the inability to keep food or drink down and is sure that medical must have a miracle drug to cure his condition. Such thoughts are mere mirages of course because medical quickly bursts that hope and informs the patient that nothing can be done and that the process has to simply play itself out. However, the reporting of the illness to medical infuriates the inmate population because the quarantine period for norovirus is three days after the last reported illness. So every report adds three days to the lockdown, which is why it can take a month or more for the thing to play out. Every new case extends the quarantine period. Men are so desperate to get out to the yard to get access to the services they need that they begin threatening anyone who reports their illness. The cops assist this effort by exposing anyone who reports. These men will have to fistfight for their transgressions upon the completion of the quarantine. The cops

make announcements in the building for us to be men and endure the symptoms and stop reporting or the quarantine will continue. So finally, under duress, men stop reporting so that the rest of the population can get to the yard and resume the line standing and daily prison grind. Meanwhile men continue to endure and spread norovirus for another month or so after the official completion. The sickness goes silent but it does not go unnoticed. The staff and medical are aware of it but everyone turns a blind eye to keep the prison program functioning in its normal dysfunctional way.

A similar kind of thing plays out for the medical transport situation which shuts everything down when an unscheduled hospital run must be made. Those who are responsible for a medical transport are often victimized or ridiculed for it. Unless you are dying, you are expected to keep your mouth shut and endure whatever ails you to keep the program running. Medical transports and contagious illnesses have entered the violent world of prison politics in the last decade or so because they interfere with a running program which adds to the length of lines and the anger on everyone's mind.

Sickness is a regular part of our existence precisely because the staff fails to provide the means necessary to prevent it. Soap and water is the miracle medicine that works preventively, but it has to be provided for it to be affective. And you would think a kitchen would be the one place you would want to focus your resources on such a preventive measure but the powers-that-be are

disconnected. They fly at 60,000 feet and miss the minutia that matter. Quarantines kill everything. No work, no school, no vocation classes, no substance abuse training program, no self-help groups or anything runs during these lockdowns. This is antithetical to the "R" of CDCR. It is California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation, but the rehabilitation part is undermined by the gross mismanagement of resources. And I've covered only a very tiny part of what really goes on. Sickness is but a minor blip on the radar, though it is a regular part of our lives. Bouts of general diarrhea and vomiting associated with food sickness is common, most of it going unreported because of fear of reprisal or interference of program. Food has to be kept cold before it gets cooked or it grows bacteria, yet the freezers and refrigerators are missing doors and seals to operate properly. Likewise, food must reach certain temperatures to kill bacteria and they must be kept hot, yet the hot carts that are supposed to do this job are broken down and don't heat well and have broken seals and plugs that shock the users. The grills leak gas and work only part of the time, the oven has been broken for two years and our chicken and other meat must be sent to C yard to be cooked, and then gets staged in areas where it can cool down. The rolling tables and carts don't roll because the wheels are busted and everything we rely on in the kitchen is either bent, broke, or jerry-rigged to function. It's a health hazard disaster. And somehow, the American Corectional Association inspects and certifies it all to be proper. The officers put soap and paper towels in the dispensers when the inspectors come and

that seems to satisfy them. From the top down, the entire System is a sham. Correctional officers, sergeants, lieutenants, captains, and wardens assist and enable what we endure every day. It's going to take someone with integrity to take the helm and make the hard choices and set the System back on stable ground. Until then, the System will continue to release agitated, resentful inmates who have no more care for themselves or those around them than the System did when they were incarcerated.

Thank you for your time,

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