

**Volunteer Report: Correctional Facilities Community Inspection  
Program  
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**Background**

The purpose of the inspection I participated in is to comply with the will of the voters in passing Measure 26-233 in November of 2022. This Multnomah County Charter Amendment requires an annual inspection of the county jails to be performed by at least one community member per commissioner, who accompanies the members of the county commission. This inspection is in addition to the regular inspection conducted by the Multnomah County Commissioners each year. The “regular” inspection is a requirement of Resolution 06-198, passed in November 2006.

The goal of the inspection is to protect the rights of Adults in Custody (AICs), and to ensure transparent and accountable practices are followed. There are additional evaluations and reviews of the county jails, including those done by the Oregon Sheriff’s Association and the Corrections Grand Jury.

Prior to the tour, I participated in the training given on the background of the inspection and preliminary information on the jail facilities, as well as the safety rules we were required to adhere to. All the procedures were designed with safety and confidentiality at the forefront.

It would have been helpful to me if it had been emphasized that we could take pads and pencils with us, to take notes. We were clearly told we were not allowed to take our phones or any personal items, of course. I had assumed that meant we could not carry anything.

**Process**

Two years ago, I participated in this inspection. This year’s process was improved. The groups were smaller, which allowed for more questions and

better communication. It felt like the process was closer to an inspection, and less of a tour. Two years ago, I was part of an entourage on a tour. So, I appreciate that the county leaders have been responsive to the feedback that previous participants have given and that they are working on continual improvement.

The groups were roughly split in half, and I was in the group that initially went to Inverness County Jail. In the afternoon, I was in the group that went to the Multnomah County Detention Center (MCDC). We saw the residential facilities, kitchens, laundry, education room, law library access, medical areas, recreation facilities, and meal delivery, as well as the intake areas at MCDC.

### **Equity and Inclusion**

Incarceration in the jail system is racially disproportionate, in both the jails of Multnomah County and in this country. This is unlikely to be resolved in one county in our one state, until we have greater societal change and equity in all aspects of American life. The racial and ethnic composition of staff does not appear to reflect the demographics of the AICs. Again, this is a broader societal challenge, though progress can still be made.

Considering this reality, it is important to acknowledge the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) commitment to its goals around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion as outlined in the FY 2025 Budget Transmittal Letter. This demonstrates a commitment to making progress and not excuses, in creating a more equitable institution.

At the Inverness location, there is one corrections person supervising forty to fifty AICs in a large dormitory setting. We were told that this is possible due to the relationship of respect that the corrections person has earned – that by treating the AICs with dignity, and with respect and safety in mind, the AICs respond to the corrections staff positively and with respect. That is not universal, but it is the usual response and relationship between the people who are incarcerated and the people overseeing them. The AICs that are not compliant in the dormitory setting receive different housing

during their incarceration. But for most AICs, we were told that treating these individuals with dignity and respect results in a return of respect.

One of the areas the MCSO has made progress in is the commitment to full staffing. As reported by the staff at Inverness, the county is less short-staffed in corrections than they were two years ago and close to full staffing.

The MCSO is also committed to reducing crime through means other than incarceration.

Most dietary needs are addressed at both facilities. The corrections staff and food service contractor both took considerable pride in the improved quality of the meals since the last inspection. Staff fully understood the significant role of good food in maintaining positive morale for AICs, and thus improved safety.

Access to continued education during incarceration is another subject that was discussed during the inspection, and it was apparent that the jail staff had a great deal of pride in the AICs that had achieved their GEDs and high school completions while in the jail. They cared about assuring academic success for people as part of supporting their efforts to be successful in life after completion of their sentence.

Single occupancy at MCSO is practiced as part of the 2003 Prison Rape Elimination Act and there is compliance with the law and standards as it existed at the time of inspection.

Specific physical and hygiene needs for people who are menstruating or pregnant are accommodated.

Overall, I was impressed with the respectful attitude that all the MCSO staff I encountered had, when they spoke about the people that are or may be in custody at the facilities.

## **Facilities**

The open setting and lack of privacy at Inverness was something that could be hard, and disturbing for some AICs, depending on their personality. There is truly no place to be somewhat alone, except for the toilet and shower facilities. Yes, this is a safety matter, but it can also be a source of stress, if there is no place to be alone. It is good to know that there are alternative options for incarceration, in case AICs become overwhelmed by being around others 24/7.

The physical condition of MCDC was mentioned several times during our visit. The comments I recall were that the building was designed to last for fifty years and that it was now over fifty years old. I questioned why the building had been designed for such a short life span. All over the world, buildings are designed to last one hundred, two hundred, or more years. Why only fifty here? The response was that various parts of the building were obsolete in regard to the technology and best practices, and that the population served was not always respectful of the facilities. We saw evidence of the upgrades and repairs that are being done to the aging infrastructure in the MCDC.

The new body scanner at the MCDC has reportedly reduced the incident of fentanyl in the jail. This is combined with a physical inspection for those who are detained.

### **Recommendations:**

1. With recidivism being a chronic issue in the justice system, has the county explored the cost/benefit of restoring Work Release programs for non-violent and appropriately screened AICs? As one of the big obstacles to re-adjustment after incarceration is finding a job, helping AICs find jobs – or keep their existing jobs – while serving their sentences may be a path to avoiding re-offending.
2. Is there a way to increase physical activity for AICs and still retain safety? This is not a fitness club, but physical activity can release stress, improve cardiovascular health, and support mental health.

What do AICs do for exercise if they do not play basketball or shoot hoops?

3. I have received conflicting information about the availability of Parenting Classes. The in-person information I recall implied that parenting classes were only provided to AICs who had custody 51% of the time or more, that communication with their children was a part of the class, and that one of the concerns was that the adult currently living with the children may not be safe with the parent that is the AIC, and therefore not want the children to have any contact. I submitted a question after the inspection regarding Parenting Classes, I asked if there were parenting classes being offered that do not involve communication with children, or, for parents that do not have custody of the children. (After all, high schools, higher education institutions, and even religious institutions offer parenting classes.) The answer I received was, "Children are not present during parenting courses. Parenting classes meet Oregon Department of Human Services requirements and participants need to be parenting/have parented or will return to parenting a child or children." It seems to me that AICs who will have contact with children in their families or future family, could benefit from understanding age-appropriate expectations, child development, and that "discipline" means "to teach." And yes, I realize children are not included in the classes in the jail!
4. The Trump administration has ended funding for the PREA Resource Center and issued new guidance that changes how some standards are applied. The new guidance especially applies to LGBTQ+ inmates. Amid challenges around implementation and enforcement, I would hope the MCSO, with the support of the Multnomah County Commission, will continue to be diligent in protecting all AICs from sexual assault through the utilization of best practices.

5. I am concerned about the potential reaction of the voters to the tax burden of building a new jail to replace the current MCDC. Considering the last few years of media coverage on the county commission, and the current tax burden in Multnomah County/City of Portland, it seems unlikely that the voters will respond positively to a capitol bond measure for this purpose. It is obvious that fresh paint is needed in the meantime, but sadly – I have seen elementary school facilities in the same condition or worse. So, operational safety, water, air quality, and lighting may need to take priority over cosmetic improvements. For now, the sheriff's office and commission should explore renovation opportunities at MCDC, ranging from trauma-informed cosmetic improvements to upgrades in technology and supportive infrastructure.
6. The intake center at MCDC is especially dark and frankly – depressing. Improvements in lighting, air flow, and with highly durable and easy-to-clean surfaces would make for a healthier place for corrections staff as well as arresting officers, and for the people who are detained.
7. As a result of inadequate mental health care facilities in our state, our jails have become home to many people who need mental health treatment. Our MCSO and county commissioners must educate our legislators as to this reality and ask them to address this statewide issue. Because the state has not stepped up in its responsibility to address the mental health needs of Oregonians, our county jails are footing the financial burden of treatment and housing.
8. We were told that the average stay of an AIC is 17 days. We were also told that some people that had been convicted of serious crimes were there for years. Next year, a more detailed breakdown of the incarceration statistics would be helpful in getting a better understanding of how long people are incarcerated.

9. There seems to be some confusion around cashless bail and what types of charges people are held on when awaiting trial, versus those who are released. This could be addressed in future briefings prior to or during the inspection.