

Report on the New York City House of Detention for Men

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To get right to the point the situation at NYCHDM is critical and extremely dangerous both for the inmates and for all personnel working at the institution including correction personnel. There are two major reasons for this situation, the sudden influx of new inmates in the past three months almost doubling the population from around 800 to around 1700 and the reduction of the social services staff, especially the Correction Aides. There is also the distinct possibility that the remainder of the Social Services staff will be terminated by the end of June.

1. Population

The population problem is not simply one of larger numbers. The real problem stems from the fact that the present facility was never designed for the daily transfer of large segments of the population. The daily transfer of inmates to court, to medication, to commissary, to the law library, to social services, to educational programs, to counsel visits, to family visits, and to the use of the phones for outside contacts puts a daily critical strain on the inmates, the correctional staff, and on the remnants of the social services staff including the Clergy Volunteers. It might be also noted here that the system of mail delivery has seriously bogged down due to the lack of personnel.

2. Morale

Since Christmas I have begun to see less and less of a possibility of any tasks for the aid and assistance of inmates being completed. It is almost impossible to return to a particular inmate for a follow-up interview. First, you have to find him, and then you have to attempt to interview him in the chaos in the front of each block. This difficulty is also heightened by the absence of the Correctional Aides who were formerly able to relay messages to the Clergy Volunteers as well as to the proper personnel in the social services.

The correction officers are under constant psychological pressure just to keep track of the inmate population. Officers who have been willing and able to assist in the past are now swamped with the details of daily business. I must stress here also that the working conditions of the correction officers are also dangerous and unhealthy both psychologically and physically.

3. The Clergy Volunteer Program

I was extremely disappointed by the pressure from superiors that the Clergy Volunteers assume the tasks of the Correction Aides. To ask them to assume what had been a full time job for a prison population half as large is the surest way to the destruction of morale and the general debilitation of the program.

What the Clergy Volunteer Program should strive for through its supervising agency, The Board of Correction, is to bring to the public's attention the real danger of the situation at NYCHDM. The Board must be heard from, and it must also actively enlist the support of sympathetic Church and social groups to bring pressure to bear on the unresponsive bureaucracy of the city government. It should also be noted here that the New York State Catholic Bishops have made prison reform their number one priority. It should also be noted that the Jesuit Conference on Corrections, a nationwide group, have also called for strong and specific actions regarding prison reform.

4. Summary

There are two major problems facing us, the proximate and the remote. The proximate is the critical situation at NYCHDM; the remote is the cooperative thrust towards prison reform in which the board must take a leadership role.