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New jail's residents: worst of the worst Tamms prison is `someplace you don't want to go'; [ALL Edition]

MICHAEL PEARSON. *Journal Star*. Peoria, Ill.: Mar 9, 1998. pg. B.1

Abstract (Summary)

Such is the welcome in store for the first few prisoners at Tamms Correctional Center, Illinois' newest and toughest state prison. Dedicated in February, Tamms will accept the first handful of its 500 inmates this week. The prison will then accept about four each day until reaching full capacity this summer.

Despite a desperate need for beds in Illinois' crowded penal system, correctional administrators aren't pressing warden George Welborn to take on more than he and his young staff can handle at this ultra-secure prison where -- if the system works right -- prisoners will never, ever come face to face.

Tamms is the first state prison of its kind in Illinois, a facility designed from the outset not to rehabilitate or even warehouse inmates, but to isolate the worst of them from the rest of Illinois' 41,000 prisoners and break them of their violent habits through strict isolation.

Full Text (839 words)

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TAMMS -- A van rambles up the long road to the prison, slides beneath a moving metal door and slows to a stop. Inside, a handful of uncertain convicts eye correctional officers dressed for battle.

The prisoners are herded into a small, windowed room just off the garage. Stripped of their clothes and everything they own, their backs turned toward each other, they are chained to 400-pound concrete stools and their bodies are searched for contraband.

Then they wait.

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Despite a desperate need for beds in Illinois' crowded penal system, correctional administrators aren't pressing warden George Welborn to take on more than he and his young staff can handle at this ultra-secure prison where -- if the system works right -- prisoners will never, ever come face to face.

After all, mistakes could be costly. The inmates chosen to fill this prison's 67-square-foot cells are the meanest, most violent that correctional officials could find.

The first group of six include an escape artist, an inmate who has earned 42 years of segregation time thanks to violent antics behind bars and a former Pontiac Correctional Center inmate who added 50 years to a 45-year murder sentence when he tried to kill a prison guard.

"We don't need any surprises," Welborn said.

Tamms is the first state prison of its kind in Illinois, a facility designed from the outset not to rehabilitate or even warehouse inmates, but to isolate the worst of them from the rest of Illinois' 41,000 prisoners and break them of their violent habits through strict isolation.

Once assigned to a cell, inmates at Tamms will spend more than 23 hours a day locked inside. From the safety of their high-tech control rooms, guards will let inmates out, one at a time, to take a shower or spend up to an hour in "the yard" -- a concrete box with a bit of sky showing through the fenced roof.

There will be no prison jobs for these inmates. No college classes. No weights. They won't even get a basketball to toss around in the yard.

Prison administrators say that's to ensure the safety of staff, and to help make Tamms so miserable that inmates

transferred back to more traditional prisons will behave -- and counsel their friends to do the same.

"We want them to go back to other prisons and spread the word," said Charles Hinsley, Tamms' assistant warden. "Tamms is someplace you do not want to go."

The word is already getting around, said Thomas Page, warden of Menard Correctional Center near Chester. With nearly 3,000 inmates, Menard is Illinois' largest prison and the one typically assigned the state's most troublesome, unrepentant prisoners.

In the past, those inmates would act out at will, knowing there was little Page could do to control their antics. Now, he says, they know better.

"A place like Tamms is going to affect my operation greatly by my inmates knowing that where this used to be the end of the tunnel, there's one more stop and it's not nearly as pleasant as this one," he said.

No doubt about that, says Michael Stanek, a spokesman for the Chicago-based Committee to End the Marion Lockdown -- a group formed to oppose control-unit practices at the federal penitentiary in Marion.

"It's one of the worst things you could do to someone who's already anti-social," he said.

Though lacking statistics to prove it, the committee and other control-unit opponents claim the constant isolation drives already violent inmates to even greater violence when they are returned to normal prison life or freed back into society.

Even worse, they claim, prison officials use the high-security and strict rules of control-unit prisons to terrorize inmates. They cite inmates who claim to have been savagely beaten and chained to their beds for days at a time while incarcerated in one of the dozens of control unit prisons across the U.S.

Welborn promises that such abuses will not be tolerated at his prison. Odie Washington, director of the Department of Corrections, said Illinois officials have carefully studied the mistakes of similar prisons in other states in hopes of avoiding them.

He promised more psychological counseling for inmates and a "decompression" phase when inmates being returned to traditional prisons will spend time in a special unit learning how to live, eat and work with other inmates again.

For some, however, Tamms will truly be the end of the line. The prison will become the new site for executions in Illinois.

A specially designed execution chamber is ready, awaiting its first use. No executions are currently scheduled, and corrections officials have not yet decided whether the next one will be held at Tamms, a department spokesman said.

Credit: Associated Press

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