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NEW STATE PRISON PUTS ALL INMATES IN SOLITARY; [NORTH SPORTS FINAL Edition]

Christi Parsons, Tribune Staff Writer.. Chicago Tribune. Chicago, Ill.: Mar 25, 1998. pg. 1

Abstract (Summary)

For that prisoner and about 50 others who moved to Tamms this month, the spectacular view isn't everything they'll be missing. They can't smoke, can't watch television, can't work out with weights. They'll sit alone inside bare-walled cells with only a few books to keep them company. The only exception is two hours a week in an empty exercise cage.

Tamms Correctional Center is Illinois' latest attempt to deal with its most difficult inmates. When officials opened the 500- bed super-maximum security prison earlier this month, they selected high-level gang leaders and violent prisoners for transfer from other prisons to be the first inmates. They include Henry Brisbon, convicted of murdering a couple on Interstate Highway 57 in 1973, as well as gang leaders such as Johnny Almodovar, sent to prison for trying to kill rival gang members.

The state's prisons have become so violent that the system now needs an entire facility devoted solely to behavior control, prison officials say. They have already "locked down" the entire Pontiac Correctional Center, keeping inmates in their cells most of the time, but wardens say even that is not punishment enough for the worst offenders.

Full Text (1268 words)

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A guard escorting a prisoner into the concrete confines of the state's newest prison one recent day had an ominous piece of advice for his charge.

"Get a good look," he said solemnly, motioning to the limestone bluffs and rolling farm fields of southern Illinois. "You ain't gonna be seeing this for a while."

For that prisoner and about 50 others who moved to Tamms this month, the spectacular view isn't everything they'll be missing. They can't smoke, can't watch television, can't work out with weights. They'll sit alone inside bare-walled cells with only a few books to keep them company. The only exception is two hours a week in an empty exercise cage.

When they walk, they'll wear leg irons. When they sit outside their cells, they'll be chained to the floor.

And for at least a year, they will not come into physical contact with another human being, except for guards giving them a hands-on escort.

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More prisoners will arrive every day, until all 500 beds are filled.

The state's prisons have become so violent that the system now needs an entire facility devoted solely to behavior control, prison officials say. They have already "locked down" the entire Pontiac Correctional Center, keeping inmates in their cells most of the time, but wardens say even that is not punishment enough for the worst offenders.

Critics don't believe Tamms is the answer. They say sensory deprivation and total isolation amount to torture tactics and that inmates will only come out more anti-social than when they walked in. There are no studies to support such tactics, they point out.

But the head of the state prison system says there isn't time to wait for such research. The current maximum-security prisons already are too dangerous for staff members, and something must be done now, said Odie Washington, director of the Illinois Department of Corrections.

"When you isolate some of the troublemakers, you're going to have a better environment," Washington said. "We want inmates to dread going to Tamms as much as they dreaded Alcatraz."

Despite the lack of research, directors and wardens say they have full faith in the Tamms plan based on the recommendations of a 1993 panel and their own intuitive sense about how things work within prisons.

Limited isolation in small stints at other prisons curbs bad behavior, they reason, so perhaps wholesale isolation for a year or more at a time will work for the biggest behavior problems.

The super-max concept is decades old. Alcatraz, open from 1934 to 1963 in San Francisco Bay, was the first. After Alcatraz closed, the federal Bureau of Prisons opened a replacement in Downstate Marion and made it a super-maximum facility in the 1970s. Since then, an even more secure federal facility has opened in Colorado.

Now states are opening their own versions.

Tamms is meant to be the perfect edition, with newly developed high-tech drug detection and security equipment and meticulous security techniques gleaned from experts around the country.

It isn't cheap. Construction alone cost \$73 million, and the state will spend about \$35,000 per inmate each year. That's about double the average cost of housing inmates in the prison system.

But Tamms is not an average prison.

Prisoners constantly are under the eyes of fish-eye cameras. There are intercoms that allow guards to eavesdrop on their cells. There is one correctional officer for every two inmates, a much higher ratio than at other prisons, and guard teams are responsible for small cellblocks of 60 inmates instead of hundreds.

As inmates move outside the cellblocks, they are surrounded by three guards and followed directly overhead by a fourth carrying a tear-gas gun.

They have absolutely no contact with other inmates, except to glimpse their distorted images passing by white cell doors riddled with dime-sized holes.

A corrupt prison employee would have a difficult time trafficking contraband and drugs to inmates at Tamms, thanks to the "ion scope," a Dustbuster-shaped device that detects whether a person's skin or clothing has come into contact with illicit drugs. Both inmates and employees are randomly tested for drugs on a regular basis.

Computers monitor employees' comings and goings, and, within a year, workers will have access to certain corridors only after passing a fingerprint scan at each entrance.

Most inmates will stay a year or two, slowly earning more privileges and, ultimately, transfer to another prison if their behavior has been good enough.

Some will never leave; for the foreseeable future, all state executions will be performed here.

"Confinement at Tamms is a tough deal," said warden George Welborn. "This place was built for the worst of the worst."

Among them are Brisbon, notorious in the system for murdering an inmate, holding four officers hostage and committing scores of other staff assaults behind bars.

Another is Alton Stewart, who got 30 years for armed robbery in Champaign but picked up six consecutive sentences for repeatedly possessing weapons inside Pontiac.

On the day he moved into Tamms, Stewart, 42, leaned somberly against a cell door in the intake ward and watched a video about what his life would be like in the months to come.

"They want to break you down here," Stewart said afterward, shaking his head. "It depends on how strong your mind is."

Critics say that is a major problem with the super-max concept. Isolation hurts prisoners, they contend, perhaps irreversibly.

"How can you learn to make it in a less restrictive environment when all you can do is sit in your cell and try not to go insane?" said Chicago lawyer Jan Susler, who has litigated many prisoner rights cases.

That may have a dangerous rather than beneficial result for the prisons and for society after the inmates are released, said Mike Mahoney, president of the John Howard Association, a prison watchdog group.

"Sensory deprivation, lack of programs--it's like lockdowns in most institutions," Mahoney said.

"They serve a purpose to accomplish a short-range goal, but then you have diminishing returns because all they do is get angry. When they get off lockdown, they will strike out at somebody."

But prison officials say they believe the approach will work, based on what they say is improved behavior when lockdowns and segregation are threatened at other prisons.

Already, prison officials think they are seeing signs of success. Welborn said that, as he walked the halls of another prison recently, inmates who knew him called out to him as he passed by.

"They were saying, 'Warden! Am I on the Tamms list?' Welborn said. "They don't want to come here. They definitely don't want to come here."

[Illustration]

PHOTOS 3 MAP; Caption: PHOTO (color): Tamms inmates are constantly monitored by guards using fish-eye cameras and intercoms. PHOTO: Guards at Illinois' new Tamms prison check out a cell to be sure it's ready for an inmate. At Tamms, there is one correctional officer for every two inmates, a much higher ratio than at other prisons. PHOTO (color): Convicted armed robber Alton Stewart looks out from his cell in Illinois' new super-maximum security prison located in Tamms. Tribune photos by Phil Greer. MAP (color): Tamms, Illinois. Chicago Tribune.

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