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Pontiac, Tamms to hold `worst-of-the-worst' | Prisoners will be confined to cells nearly all the time; [M1,M2 Edition]

EMILY WILKERSON COPLEY NEWS SERVICE. State Journal Register. Springfield, Ill.: Aug 25, 1996. pg. 9

Abstract (Summary)

The tiny town of Tamms in far southern Illinois has gained a reputation in recent years as the future home of the meanest people in the state. The community is expected to nearly double in size next year with the opening of the "super-max" prison -- a facility that will house 500 of the most troublesome prison inmates in an environment that promises a life of hard time.

But by the time the super-maximum security prison opens its doors, the name "Pontiac" also is likely to be known as home to some of the worst-of-the-worst and a prison to be feared by those who are transferred there.

Inmates will be allowed time in the recreation yard only in small groups and only for about an hour a week. Prisoners will be handcuffed when they leave for showers, medical care or visits. Even prisoners' meals will be delivered to their cells through a small slot in the steel doors. The prison will be converted into a "disciplinary segregation" facility housing inmates who have violated prison rules. The idea has prompted criticism by advocates for inmate rights who complain that keeping convicts locked in their cells nearly all day is inhumane and will breed harder criminals.

Full Text (863 words)

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The tiny town of Tamms in far southern Illinois has gained a reputation in recent years as the future home of the meanest people in the state. The community is expected to nearly double in size next year with the opening of the "super-max" prison -- a facility that will house 500 of the most troublesome prison inmates in an environment that promises a life of hard time.

But by the time the super-maximum security prison opens its doors, the name "Pontiac" also is likely to be known as home to some of the worst-of-the-worst and a prison to be feared by those who are transferred there.

Under a plan introduced this week, the cell bars at Pontiac Correctional Center will be replaced with solid steel doors. Its residents will be confined to their cells nearly 23 hours a day.

Inmates will be allowed time in the recreation yard only in small groups and only for about an hour a week. Prisoners will be handcuffed when they leave for showers, medical care or visits. Even prisoners' meals will be delivered to their cells through a small slot in the steel doors. The prison will be converted into a "disciplinary segregation" facility housing inmates who have violated prison rules. The idea has prompted criticism by advocates for inmate rights who complain that keeping convicts locked in their cells nearly all day is inhumane and will breed harder criminals.

"It's horrendous," said Michael Stanek, a member of the Committee to End the Marion Lockdown. "We don't believe that anyone should be kept under that condition. It's torture."

The philosophy behind the conversion isn't new. The facility won't have the same high-tech security devices that will be used at prisons such as Tamms. But the concept is similar to the one that spurred Tamms and other super-maximum security facilities across the country.

Creating separate prisons for the convicts who cause trouble in prison "seems to be a very rational step," said Norm Carlson, a sociology professor at University of Minnesota and former director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

"The states have had the same problems of substantial increases in the number of violent offenders who continue to be predatory even while in prison," he said.

The so-called super-max prisons started with Alcatraz. Then came the federal penitentiary at Marion.

In the past decade, 25 states have created high-security prisons or units to cope with their most violent groups of criminals, according to a 1993 study by the National Institute of Corrections. Twenty of those facilities were designed as super-max prisons. The other five states upgraded existing facilities with improved security measures.

Once Tamms opens -- possibly late in 1997 -- the most violent, troublesome Illinois convicts will be housed there in a rigid environment that allows little contact with other prisoners or staff. Other inmates could be segregated at Pontiac for specific terms after they commit serious offenses in prison and then sent back to their original place of confinement. "Somebody who does something stupid once and never does it again isn't likely to go back to Pontiac," said Nic Howell, corrections spokesman. But other inmates "will be in segregation for 10 years because even while they are in segregation they continue their nefarious ways. Those are the kind of guys who will go to Tamms."

Officials say the Pontiac facility won't be much different from the segregation units already in place at each of the state's adult prisons. But with the state creating more segregation space, troublesome inmates will be more likely to serve their entire terms of intense confinement, Howell said.

Inmates can receive one year of segregation for serious offenses, such as arson, assault, bribery, extortion, possession of dangerous contraband, sexual misconduct and violating federal laws.

Prisoners who commit more than one violation of prison rules could be sentenced to segregation for years on end, Howell said.

But just as the system has more criminals than cells in which to house them, the segregation units also are overbooked, meaning many inmates are released into the general population of the prison before they finish their segregation terms.

Some of the inmates are expected to be double-celled. About 1,600 prisoners will live in the Pontiac facility, which is designed for 1,200. The conversion is expected to improve safety for staff working in the maximum-security Pontiac prison, corrections officials say. Built in 1871, the antiquated facility lends itself to assaults by inmates on staff. Significant modifications will have to be made, including installation of solid steel doors on the cells, the addition of yard cages and increased security lighting. Corrections officials say they do not know the cost of the project.

Pontiac guards have supported the changes at the institution, saying it would be worth the cost to house the

troublemakers of the system as long as the design of the facility also is upgraded.

"We think it is a good decision overall," said Henry Bayer, executive director of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 31. "Our concern is: Is it going to be properly implemented? Are they going to devote the proper resources it would take to remodel the existing facilities?"

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