

Rep. Curt Taylor's Testimony on Michigan Corrections Visit

Over the last several years, as a member of the Corrections and Institutions committee and on my own I have visited nine corrections facilities within and outside Vermont. Recently I have concentrated on women's facilities as the replacement of Chittenden Regional Corrections Facility (CRCF) is one of my personal legislative goals. The women's facilities I have toured are: CRCF in South Burlington where I also shadowed a Corrections Officer for eight hours, the Maine facility described by Representative Demrow, and the Michigan facility. Later this fall I will be visiting the new facility in Concord, NH, and the women's facility outside Anchorage, AK. My testimony today relates to my visit to the Michigan women's facility.

Michigan

In August of this year my wife and I toured the Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility (WHV) in Ypsilanti, outside Detroit. Warden Shawn Brewer spent over two-hours walking us through about one-half of the facility.

WHV is located outside Ypsilanti, Michigan, 45 minutes from downtown Detroit and 20 minutes from the city of Ann Arbor.

WHV is the only women's facility in Michigan. There are also county lockups and jails that may house women temporarily. Inmates are all 18 years of age or older.

The facility was built around 2005. By 2009 it had consolidated three women's facilities.

Inmates at WHV are held at security levels I, II and IV (Community Release, Minimum Security, and High Security). Inmates do not leave the confines of the facility except for short work details within the prison boundaries. The 180-acre site is surrounded by two razor-wire fences armed with electronic detection systems and surveillance cameras. Vehicles with armed personnel patrol the perimeter.

The facility has a capacity of 2400 women, more than the total number of men and women incarcerated in Vermont. It is a big facility. The slide accompanying this testimony shows the relative size of CRCF compared to WHV and the bed capacity of three types of buildings in the WHV complex. Each type of unit houses about as many inmates as Vermont's women's facility in South Burlington.

Economies of scale are significant. A female inmate in Michigan costs the state about \$39,000 a year; a little more than half Vermont's female inmate cost. But . . . Vermont does not need, or want, a women's facility with 2400 beds. Though the Michigan facility, in many ways, cannot be compared to Vermont's needs, I learned a great deal from the visit.

Lessons from Michigan

Every state's department of corrections is a target for litigation. The legal library at WHV was filled with inmates doing legal research. For 2018 Michigan DOC was dealing with 740 lawsuits.

In the mid-1990's several lawsuits were filed against the State of Michigan. The result of nearly a decade of litigation was a \$140 million settlement to the victims and required changes to the way women are incarcerated in Michigan.

According to the agreement, the Michigan DOC would develop and maintain a policy regarding sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, and retaliation. The settlement also addressed screening of prospective employees, staff training, prisoner education, and the process for investigating allegations of misconduct. As a result, restrictions were placed on which supervisory positions can be performed by male corrections officers. The training of corrections officers destined for the women's facility now includes an understanding of the different means by which a woman, as opposed to a man, becomes involved in the criminal justice system. The additional week-long training course for corrections officers heading to the Huron Facility includes guidelines on how interactions with female inmates are different from those with male inmates.

When considering long term plans for Vermont correctional facility construction, we must consider the legal landscape that not only dictates how and where a facility is built but also the potential for lawsuits regarding those incarcerated there.

Concerns that any new facilities in Vermont have adequate lighting, program space, and atmosphere are important. But the qualifications, training, salary and working conditions of those who work in those facilities is equally important. My Michigan visit made me realize that the men and women whose primary job is to oversee inmates and who interact with them daily must also be considered when planning the future of corrections facilities and policy in Vermont.

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