

Inmates with pin hole cameras made out of cereal boxes.



JAILS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES: Piedmont Regional Jail as a Community Model

Jails perform a variety of purposes in the areas they serve. We all know that they house inmates: inmates awaiting trial, sentencing, parole, and more. Especially in the post 9/11 world, jails have increasingly been used to house Homeland Security Department detainees, federal marshal arrestees, and contract bed inmates for departments of corrections. These are vital services necessary for our society. What is often overlooked, however, is that performing these services can also make our jails an important part of our local communities. In order to be a genuinely successful institution, a jail must fashion for itself an explicit community role.

Piedmont Regional Jail (PRJ) in Southside Virginia, has sought to be an active and productive member of the community it serves. Quality jails support their communities and their communities support them. Here we discuss the experiences of PRJ as an innovative model for

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Above: Shows a student and inmate in discussion about the pictures they have taken.



Depicts the make shift photograph development laboratory that was constructed on the recreation yard. Students, inmates and the instructor are shown.



Listed from LEFT to right: Major Harry Wyatt, Major Charles Marshall, Major Robert Pugh, Superintendent Lewis W. Barlow, Sheila Hight, Education Coordinator, Major Donald Hunter, Major Ernest Toney.

other jails. Recognizing that jails can and should play a vital role in the health of their communities is requisite for the long-term success of institutions like ours. Given the educational, security, and community challenges of the 21st century, jails need to develop proactive plans to remain useful. We build relationships to bind the jail and community together.

Piedmont Regional Jail was one of the first regional jails in Virginia. Established in 1988, it was not until several years later under the leadership of Superintendent Lewis W. Barlow that jail authorities recognized various unfulfilled needs and opportunities that the jail was uniquely positioned to address. Piedmont Regional Jail provides custody for six mostly rural counties in south-central Virginia.¹ The major employers in these counties are hospitals, educational institutions, agriculture, construction, and the jail itself. Given the rural

nature of the larger community, PRJ has an unusually large effect on the area, not only as an employer, but as an institution that has contact with a relatively significant portion of the populace. This important double-role means that how PRJ impacts the people of the area determines in no small measure the nature and quality of life for everyone in the region.

Should Jails Be Involved in Their Communities?

Absolutely! One common view we encounter outside of our walls and fences is that jails are for “bad” people. As such, many want jails to be separated from their communities and hence *not involved*. The feeling is perhaps understandable, but it is also counter-productive. Our local jails house mostly local people. The large majority of their inmates are neighbors who made a mistake and will return to the community. Jails thus

have a unique opportunity to instill civic responsibility in inmates while helping them become more successful and productive members of our communities.

Jails are poised to serve as centers of community integration and service. The goal may be achieved by reaching out to the local populace, encouraging the community to “reach in” to draw on jails as local resources, and by structuring jails so that they are operated on a model that is friendly to the area and its aspirations. Piedmont Regional Jail has endeavored to make strides in all of these areas, and offers its own experiences as a starting point for discussion.

Community ‘Outreach’

As with many jails, PRJ is a partner in the community through the use of inmate and employee volunteer work. Inmates pick up litter and build ramps to make community buildings and private homes handicap accessible, but PRJ has gone beyond the usual. Well-screened inmate trustees provide services to the community that extend beyond the usual. As a part of an ongoing community outreach program, PRJ helps build houses for Habitat for Humanity. In 2004 when Virginia was suffering from a drought, the town of Farmville had a water crisis. The jail volunteered inmate labor to lay irrigation pipes from one water source to another providing an uninterrupted water supply for the area. Without the jail’s participation, the cost of the construction would have

been prohibitive. The people of Farmville may well have been denied water for many of their needs. Jails should not simply wait for opportunities to help. They should be thinking about how best to contribute on an ongoing basis.

Critics might object that interjecting jail projects into the community can actually harm local businesses. After all, inexpensive inmate labor can undercut legitimate private business interests. The concern is real and appropriate, which is why jails need to understand their own communities. In the case of the irrigation project, without the jail's support there was excellent reason to believe that the project would not have occurred at all, threatening the well-being of the people in the town. Jails should not volunteer inmate labor indiscriminately; they should be ready to lend assistance when *appropriate*. Jails are local institutions and when properly run they are well suited to provide support for their communities. PRJ does not want to be, or be perceived as a drain on local resources.

Education

In some cases, jails are *ideally* suited to promote the welfare of their service areas. In early 2000, the state of Virginia developed an educational program designed to serve special education/low ability youth between the ages of 16 and 22 adjudicated as adults and incarcerated in adult jails. The state mandate places the responsibility of educating these youths on the school system in which the jail is located. The program is directly related to the Individual Disabilities Education Act and No Child Left Behind Act. The mandate by the state, in addition to placing a new burden on the jail, allows PRJ the opportunity to do more.

The Jail Education Coordinator, Sheila Hight, orchestrates a program inside PRJ for youthful offenders designed to provide them with the basic educational services required by law. With the support and encouragement of the jail, Hight also has expanded the program to include life skills instruction and career exploration with the intention of reducing recidivism. Prince

Edward County Public School system is technically responsible for the program, but youth from any county in the state of Virginia that passes through the jail are assisted in this program. Most of these youthful offenders have not completed high school (or acquired a GED) and typically have no marketable employment skills. The local school systems are often ill-prepared to handle these students, especially when they are absent for long periods of time while incarcerated. Inmates frequently express frustration with the "system" and their inability to function in the outside world. Many in the program are parents and have little or no parental training. A majority of these students have no idea how to manage money, conduct banking transactions, or function as competent consumers. The program provides instruction in active parenting, consumer education, banking, career exploration, and what it means to be an adult. This program is probably not so different than many other adult programs you find within a jail, but it is directed toward school-age youth, many of whom are graduating seniors. If the student is enrolled in school, the coordinator works with the school system so the inmate may complete the requirements for the courses he is taking allowing him to return to school after release and receive a high school diploma. Since the program's inception six students have graduated this way.

It should not be surprising that such young minds are frequent visitors to our jails. In the last five years (2001 through 2006), just over 1,000 young adults between the ages of 16 and 22 have passed through PRJ. Of this 1,000, only 410 entered the jail with a diploma and a further 167 were designated as special education/low ability students. As a result, the jail has opted to emphasize life and employment skills over simply trying to help young men and women get their degrees.

The jail's educational impact does not end with a diploma. Youthful offenders in the jail are transitioned into other community programs where they can complete their education and go on to enter post-secondary training in an aftercare program. Students may be referred to the

Workforce Investment Act's Youth Jobs Program. The program works with Southside Virginia Community College's "Middle College" program. By partnering with other programs and institutions in the area, the jail hopes to provide a network of services that will give these youthful offenders a greater chance to lead productive lives. Students who leave the jail without direction or at least the promise of opportunity become repeat visitors. Teaching students how to transition into the adult world coupled with providing life skills instruction bodes well for their success because they are in a situation with structure and goals. Since this program began only two participants have returned to jail and gone on to prison.

Other Services

In order to help area citizens, the jail has also developed other services for inmates about to be released. Piedmont Regional Jail, under the supervision of its counselor Carolyn Stiff, has developed gender specific prerelease packets for every jurisdiction the jail serves. Inside each packet is information about local services, sexually transmitted diseases and where to get help, as well as pamphlets to help their children, and the names of and contact information for community agencies. These packets were developed in response to the persistent claim by inmates that they did not know where to go for help. Several years ago a young woman told the employment caseworker, "Where were you the first time I got locked up?" Although one might be skeptical about the rationalizations that inmates give for their presence in jail, PRJ has had success with this program. The information is not thrown away and local agencies have reported referrals owing to these packets. The data set thus far is too small to be statistically significant, but even if only a few inmates profit from the service, the benefits will spread more widely throughout the community. These packets remove one barrier and put the ex-inmate's life back into the community, giving direction and hopefully reducing recidivism.

Where possible, PRJ has sought to forge specific relationships with local programs. Amelia County has a program called Parents and Children Education that provides education and parenting counseling to citizens of that county. Inmates who are residents of Amelia County are provided special referrals to that program, and many inmates have taken advantage of the opportunity. The program has an excellent record of helping young parents who need guidance and support raising their children. Participants receive parenting skills and they can work on completing their GED while the children are in supervised play. Later the children and parents spend quality time together. Piedmont Regional Jail has sought to bring these personal touches to its community service.

Piedmont Regional Jail also seeks to reach out by forging ties with other law enforcement agencies. The jail built a combat pistol range for the training of its officers and a wide variety of local law enforcement agencies use the facility for their own officers. Building relationships with other branches of the legal and judicial system can help PRJ more efficiently complete its own job. Working closely with various judges and courts has allowed the jail to institute a program of medical furloughs for those inmates who are ill and have not committed a violent or serious crime. Such measures, in addition to building good-will with the inmates and their families, also can have the benefit of lowering the jail's medical costs. For example, the excellent relationship the jail has with the local judiciary allowed PRJ to furlough a young woman until after her baby was delivered. After delivery she returned to PRJ and completed her sentence.

Sometimes the jail needs to take a leadership role in the community at large as well. After the devastation of hurricane Katrina, the jail helped coordinate a relief effort with the town of Farmville, all six of the counties it serves, Charlotte County (another local county the jail does not usually serve), and several prominent area businesses. As a result, instead of a small contribution, the combined effort allowed the community to actu-

ally fill two 30-ft tractor trailers of donated relief supplies. The supplies went to Hattiesburg, Mississippi, whose residents were in desperate need. The relief effort for Katrina victims was an unusual occurrence. Most often jails need to keep their efforts in their local communities.

At PRJ, Majors Hunter, Marshall, Pugh, and Toney formed an athletic association called The Piedmont Athletic Association. The group sponsors two golf events each year that donate the proceeds to local charities, including youth basketball programs, the local Special Olympics, and more.

Jail personnel sponsor needy families during the holidays and even have an ongoing program that gives two scholarships to local high school seniors planning on attending a local community college.

Forging these kinds of community partnerships is nice and probably not uncommon for many jails. Yet when such a relationship becomes ordinary and institutionalized, it can lose effectiveness over time. A part of reaching out to the community requires that the jail have a personal touch in these programs that recognizes that inmates are *persons*. Consider the example of a



Off the chart.

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recent inmate who was from New York State. He had no ties to south-side Virginia, and no family nearby. He was about to be released and had to report to probation. The inmate asked to be transferred to New York, but the probation office refused to do the paperwork for the transfer. Counselor Stiff investigated the problem and argued that the refusal of transfer to New York was only setting the inmate up for failure. The inmate and counselor worked together and eventually convinced the commonwealth attorney to make the necessary arrangements.

Piedmont Regional Jail has sought to bring these personal touches to its community service. As a result, it is incumbent upon us not to convert future neighbors into criminals. The local jail can positively contribute to its community in this particular way, and there are many small actions a jail might take to serve this end. For example, at PRJ our chaplain, Earl Townsend, is a certified police officer for the town of Farmville. The overlap in responsibility allows PRJ to extend personal services that would not otherwise be available. When a member of an inmate's family is ill or passes away, the chaplain (as an officer) makes arrangements and transports the inmate to the funeral under proper supervision that often is otherwise not possible. His dual role allows him to intervene more successfully in situations to avoid problems. In one instance, a teenager adjudicated as an adult had a problem. His mother worked on his visitation day and could not come to see him. The chaplain made arrangements for his mother to see him on her day off. Given the small and often closely knit community in a rural area, these small acts can have positive impacts beyond the inmates themselves.

Once per week inmates are allowed to order in "street food." They might order in Mexican, Chinese, or even fried chicken. The food from the outside maintains the appearance of some normalcy for the inmates and officers report that the meals have a calming effect on their behavior. The program is a privilege and neither difficult nor costly to administer, but it is

a small signal to the inmates that they are people in an unfortunate circumstance, not simply objectified criminals suitable only for derision. Providing standard jail services such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and religious counseling is only the start of the process. Piedmont Regional Jail allows, when possible, inmates who are college students to attend classes and serve their time around their class schedules. Job services provided through the Virginia Employment Commission and other programs (some mentioned earlier) matter. Piedmont Regional Jail tries to make sure that inmates are not just released, but released with connections to other support services. Jails have some obligation to recognize and address the positive influence they can have in the community by treating inmates as future neighbors.

Community "In-reach"

As much as jails can reach out to their communities, they also need to organize themselves in such a way that encourages their localities to "reach in" and voluntarily use the jail as a resource. Fostering such an attitude toward the community can be difficult, especially since many citizens do not understand the detailed functioning of jails and many suggested programs using the jail impose additional work on the facility and its staff. Nonetheless, the benefits of a community "in-reach" program are significant.

Piedmont Regional Jail holds open houses and tours of the facility where everyone in the area is invited to attend. The point is to make the community feel as if the jail welcomes input and suggestions for local improvement. One sign of a good jail-community relationship is that local groups approach the jail unprompted for help. The local Meals-On-Wheels program asked PRJ to help them replace the roof on the building that houses Meals-On-Wheels as well as other senior citizen programs. Officers with roofing experience volunteered their time and worked with inmates to replace the roof, freeing the money that was destined for the roof for other needed senior citizen projects.

We are fortunate to have two post-secondary institutions nearby, Hampden-Sydney College and Longwood University. Both schools have approached the jail with projects that have been successfully implemented. Beyond ordinary events like internships where students learn about corrections, both schools have sent students to the jail to conduct research, from secondary education to psychology. Longwood's Education Department has sent education majors to the jail to observe the youth program, and its freshman orientation education students tour the jail and talk with the instructor about educating incarcerated youth.

In the 2004–2005 academic year, Hampden-Sydney Professors Claire Deal and Pamela Fox taught a year-long freshman honors course on documentaries, using the jail and some of its inmates as subject material. The participating students each crafted a documentary based on a volunteer inmate. The experiment was such a success that the students produced a "social documentary exhibit" entitled *Living with Conviction* demonstrating what they had learned from the process. As a part of the experience, student-inmate teams learned how to build pin-hole cameras and make quality photographs which they used in the exhibit. The program was empowering for both the inmates and the students. The inmates, some for the first time, were placed in a role where they had something to share and teach students. The students learned that people incarcerated in local jails are often ordinary people just like themselves.

The Hampden-Sydney program, like all other community programs, took time and effort. Yet that effort is not uncompensated. It may be difficult to quantify the impact of PRJ on the community; most often we do not know the extent to which these additional efforts have helped shape lives. What we do hear has been encouraging and has garnered PRJ the status of a community leader.

The Jail as Community Member

Being a community leader, however, means more than participating in charity events and inviting local

interests to use the jail as a resource. Leadership also has an administrative element as well. Jails can be expensive. As a result, to the extent feasible, jails have an obligation not to be financial burdens on the communities they serve. Rural Virginia is not a particularly wealthy area of the state, thus the imperative of not being a burden is all the more keenly felt. In response to this challenge, PRJ has sought to be self-sufficient without sacrificing its original mission. When PRJ opened, the six participating counties contributed slightly over five percent of the annual operating budget for the jail. Those monies were used for operation and personnel costs not covered by the Virginia State Compensation Board. The State Compensation Board's role is to determine a reasonable budget for the total cost of office operations and to assist those officers and their staff through automation, training, and other means to ensure efficient service to the region. Today PRJ receives no monies from the six counties it continues to serve.

In 2005, Piedmont Regional Jail began housing detainees for Homeland Security and the U.S. Federal Marshal's office. A sister facility on site was built, the Piedmont Detainee Center. Piedmont Regional Jail was one of the first jails to develop a contract with Homeland Security to house illegal aliens. The expansion was funded through years of careful management. The jail participates in the Virginia Department of Corrections "contract bed" program and houses overflow inmates from other jurisdictions. The expansion was built without cost to the counties and without the need for a bond or loan.

As a result of these kinds of measures, the jail is not just a member of the community, it is a *responsible* member. Implementing programs, no matter the intentions, needs to be tempered by the costs associated with them. Programs designed to improve the well-being of a community must have their approval and support, even if only tacit, in order to properly function. Planning for community "out-reach" and "in-reach" programs in a fiscally appropriate manner is a part of that recipe for success.

Again, Should Jails be Involved in Their Communities?

When governed with appropriate care and management, jails can and should be vital members of their communities. Their clientele, no matter what some might think, include friends, neighbors, and people who constitute our local communities. Many of these people require help for which they do not know how to ask or secure. As a result, sometimes the local jail is the *only* resource the community has to effectively reach these people. People incarcerated in jails return to the community more quickly than their prison counterparts. Without positive preparation or intervention further acts of delinquency are often inevitable.

John Irwin argues in *The Jail*² that places like PRJ are best understood as institutions where, for a short period of time, society places those individuals it deems disruptive. Individuals sent to jail are not always serious offenders; their crimes are often not severe enough to result in long-term incarceration. In PRJ, they are usually property offenders, substance abusers, or have difficulty controlling their impulses (leading to assaults, etc.). Many people still see jails as places to be isolated and discouraged from participating in the life of the community. Yet the benefits of a jail that is an active, productive member of its community is enormous—even life changing.

To provide just one concluding example from the wealth of experiences at Piedmont Regional Jail, consider the story of John Doe.³ John was serving a sentence for a driving charge. He worked as a trustee for our maintenance department for about a year, where he met and interacted with jail employees in a positive environment. John became interested in becoming a firefighter. One of the maintenance officers happened to be the president of his local volunteer fire department and he encouraged John to work towards a productive goal. The jail supports this kind of informal mentoring. John completed his jail term, paid off his fines, and even participated successfully in the jail's work release program. Shortly thereafter John moved into the fire district where the officer lived and

joined the volunteer fire department. He works there today—an example of how a truly community focused jail cannot just change, but *improve* lives. In this case, PRJ helped not only John, but an entire community that benefits each and every time John participates in a fire call. ☺

Endnotes

1. The counties include Amelia, Buckingham, Cumberland, Lunenburg, Nottingham, and Prince Edward.
2. Irwin, John. 1985. *The Jail*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
3. Name changed to protect privacy.

Lewis W. Barlow, Certified Jail Manager, has been Superintendent of Piedmont Regional Jail since 1995. He has over 25 years experience in law enforcement and has a bachelor's degree in public management from the University of Redlands, Redlands, California. He is a graduate of the FBI National Academy. He was selected Superintendent of the Year by the American Jail Association in 2001 and is active in many civic organizations in Farmville, Virginia, including his position on the Board of Directors of the Robert Russa Moton Museum for Civil Rights Education. He can be reached at (434) 392-1601.

Sheila Hight, is the Jail Education Coordinator for Prince Edward County Public Schools. She has thirty years experience educating at-risk youth and adults in welfare to work programs, adult education, literacy, Pre-GED, and GED programs in several states. She has a bachelor's degree in education from the University of North Texas, Denton, Texas. She holds a professional teaching license with endorsements in special education, child abuse, and technology. She is highly qualified under NCLB in the four core content areas; mathematics, social studies, science, and English/reading. She serves on the Jail Education Advisory Board for the State of Virginia Department of Education.

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