

COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

SUMMARY EVALUATION



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TO: GOVERNOR MILLS E. GODWIN, JR.
FROM: FRED T. WILKINSON
SUBJECT: SUMMARY EVALUATION OF VIRGINIA CORRECTIONS
DEPARTMENT

At your request I am setting down some observations of the Corrections Department operations as of the close of 1974. I am optimistic about these operations and would consider that Virginia is in about the middle range in comparison with the fifty state correction systems. Traditionally, the Corrections Department has been neglected because of understandable priorities involving the urgent needs of other state agencies and the taxpayers. This has resulted in "peaks and valleys" and a spot light has been cast upon the Department during the past several years. It has been difficult for citizens and perhaps the media to recognize that Corrections is in ferment throughout the nation. The Virginia Department has been preoccupied with stop gap improvisations and the necessity to cope with "brush fires" for a considerable period of time. One of my first observations was the large number of "studies" underway not only by the Department but by other involved or interested groups. In effect, many people in and out of the Department have been either Charting a Plan or Planning a Chart which has spawned inertia when action was urgently needed.

PROGRAMS

In the zeal to install new and "innovative" programs, many actions were taken without proper planning, departmental guidance and follow-up supervision. Two such programs are work release and furlough grants. Early in your administration steps were taken to prescribe guidelines in order that balance might be achieved in these programs. They have improved substantially though some of the actions taken prior to these modifications have still come on to plague the Department. At best, having to pull back or retract on programs involving large numbers of inmates has an adverse effect on their morale and is unsettling to the staffs of the corrections facilities. Most important these uncertainties have stifled initiative and in some cases brought about a negative or questioning reaction particularly from the far flung field units.

Despite some negative incidents that have resulted from the imbalance in these and other programs, the Department has moved forward vigorously in recent months to cope with deficiencies and I feel confident that while some incidents are unavoidable, the approach is now on a sound basis. There is still imperativeness to improve coordination and direction in the field unit system to compel superintendents and staff to recognize and accept responsibility to do things that can be done with existing facilities and with present staff; such as, establishing more activities

particularly in recreation, self-improvement of individuals, and to assure continuous supervision of established programs. There is no question that some of the regrettable incidents that have occurred resulted from either faulty classification or failure on the part of unit staff members to vigorously and continuously supervise inmates in their charge and to bring to the attention of the central office any persons who appeared to be wrongly classified.

Director Jack Davis has appointed a committee of experienced correctional officials to review the work release program with the objective of strengthening guidelines. The Chairman, Dr. Preston Sharp*, Mr. J. J. Clark, retired federal warden and Mr. Paul Skelton, work release and community center director for the Florida Corrections system should assure a quality report.

*Nationally known in corrections and on the faculty of VCU.

PERSONNEL

In the short time the Department of Corrections has operated without the benefit of help from the Department of Welfare, steps have been taken to recruit some top staff from other areas for an infusion of experience and new ideas. Two such officials are already on duty within the Department. It is expected that within a short time an assistant director, long experienced in classification programs will be added. At the same time, efforts are being made to "discover" people who are presently in the Department who can fill more responsible jobs and I am sure this will tend not only to enhance morale throughout but will place staff members in positions where they can be far more productive. Some people have been in positions without well defined duties and responsibilities which has tended to create uncertainties and faulty management in some institutions. Within recent months instructions have gone out to make it clear to the units as to whom they should report, and the chain of command has been more clearly delineated. This will, I am sure, prevent the various unit leaders from riding off in every direction with programs that may have to be eliminated or retracted.

We have worked to change the image of line personnel not only by designation change from "Guard" to "Corrections Officer" but to bring about training of all personnel including so-called specialists such as counselors, treatment staff, and those who are involved with volunteer group operations. This includes making *all employees* responsible for security regardless of assignment.

PHYSICAL FACILITIES

I scarcely need to discuss the ancient penitentiary in terms of physical layout. However, a number of changes and improvements have been made in its operation during the past year. First, the population has been substantially reduced which has improved living conditions. The industrial operations have been improved by reducing the number of men assigned to the several factories and shops. This has enabled better training of these inmates and has produced more efficiency without the evils attendant upon any

production operation that is grossly overstaffed. After some difficulties and several personnel changes, academic, vocational and general treatment programs have been improved, though much remains to be done. A substantial inside recreation area has been developed by changes in an unused building. The institution is much cleaner than it has been for a number of years and is more attractive from the standpoint of new dining room facilities and exterior painting. Better security and control have been achieved by physically separating the large cell blocks.

The Powhatan Correctional Center (State Farm) is a modern facility and reasonably secure though a number of open dormitories create problems that are inevitable in open housing for large groups. It is my feeling that improvements can be made in self-improvement, recreation, and other program areas that might relax the institution without lessening security.

The St. Brides Correctional facility (Chesapeake) has potential that has not yet been utilized. Plans are underway to make it a specialized institution for academic and vocational training.

The approximately thirty (30) field units spotted about the state are classified as permanent and temporary. The ten (10) so-called temporary units have outlived their usefulness because of the decrease in highway department work and because of inadequacies as permanent housing. It is hoped that these units can be discontinued in the future. One of the management problems in these units has been a tendency on the part of many superintendents to transfer troublesome or chronically maladjusted inmates rather than deal with their problems. Some transfers are necessary but they have been too frequent, with a result that some units are chronically overloaded with problem cases.

Discontinuance of the "temporary" field units as well as other needed changes can take place only when new facilities are constructed. I would place high priority on moving forward on the construction of the maximum facility (Mecklenburg) with all possible speed. The three regional 500 man medium security facilities that have been proposed would be the key to eventual elimination of the penitentiary. They can provide modern housing and training programs, especially for the many young adults who are finding their way into confinement. Another facility greatly needed is a medical complex such as a floor of a state hospital where the marginally mental cases can be under close supervision and regular treatment. A recent escape incident from the penitentiary emphasizes this need.

INMATES - GENERAL

There have been many changes in characteristics of inmates in Virginia and nationally during recent years. Virginia's state system is even more complicated by housing misdemeanants in the state institutions. A number of studies and the observations of experienced correctional people have noted that some of the ills of society have been transmitted to correctional institutions by the confinement of a much larger percentage of violence-prone

offenders, anti-establishment and militant groups, and many who are devoted to nihilism and discord within the prisons. This has created new problems that require every skill available to administrators to deal with these groups without punishing or discriminating against other inmates who attempt to rehabilitate themselves. A natural result of improved programs in corrections has created problems similar to those in society where people who feel they have been repressed demand more and more and they want it quickly. Therefore, it becomes a thin line between overpermissiveness and the realities of security for society and the protection of the majority of inmates. It simply is not possible to manage an institution nowadays by simply confining and restricting its inmates, if for no other reason, a number of court decisions have limited the measures that can be taken to insure control. The impact on the citizens as well as the media must be taken into account when management decisions are made. The media rightfully looks with an interested eye on management and the public not only looks critically but those who have a genuine interest in corrections can become quite emotional when things do not run smoothly. It is impossible to run any correctional system without isolated incidents, some being serious indeed, such as holding hostages, assaults on staff personnel, and assaults by inmates upon their fellow inmates. It is as difficult to read men's minds in prison as it is on the outside when unpredictable mass violence occurs. In the final analysis, facilities in which qualitative programs can be carried out enable a greater degree of security for the majority than towers and big cell blocks.

I believe the corrections system in the state of Virginia is doing a good job with facilities and resources available and is on the threshold of consistent and lasting improvements.

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