

Jail Tales: A glimpse at life inside

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Bristol County Sheriff Thomas Hodgson, seen here outside the House of Correction in Dartmouth, has faced criticism over various policies at county jails. However, he says his policies and proposals encourage accountability, something crucial for inmate and staff safety and prisoner success. “We want them to assimilate back into society in a way that will make it more likely for them to succeed,” he said.

Paul Connors / The Sun Chronicle

Howard’s out after an 18-month stint in the Bristol County House of Correction.

A couple of years ago he cut a deal with a prosecutor to stay on the street, but it didn’t work out.

He pleaded guilty to “threatening to commit a crime” and got three years probation.

But he violated probation and got sent to jail for two years.

After piling up six months worth of “good time,” Howard got out early.

Good time is time off a sentence for good behavior and includes credit for activities such as working at the jail.

He got seven days credit for every month he worked in the kitchen. He got three more days for cleaning the dispatch area.

He had to get up at 4:30 a.m. every day for the kitchen shift and there was nothing good about that, except it got him out of jail sooner.

Howard, who wants anonymity and chose the name by which he's known for this story, doesn't fit the usual profile of a jail inmate.

They're usually much younger and often have a substance abuse problem.

HOC spokesman Jonathan Darling said it's estimated that as many as 80 percent of inmates are jailed on drug or drug-related charges.

Darling said the specific number of those with substance abuse problems is unknown, but more than 300 inmates take part in "some kind of substance abuse programming every week."

On a weekly basis that, would be about 30 percent of this year's average monthly population of 1,069.

But Howard said it was obvious to him many have problems.

He quoted often heard words.

"Seventy percent of the guys in there — all they talk about is, 'as soon as I get out I'm gonna get a fix,'" he said.

He claimed to know of two guys who died of overdoses within two weeks after leaving the jail.



"Howard," who requested anonymity, served 18 months split between the Bristol County House of Correction in Dartmouth and the Ash Street Jail in New Bedford.

MARK STOCKWELL / THE SUN CHRONICLE

Howard's Record

Howard came to crime late in life.

He's 59 now. And from as much as can be told from a 90-minute interview, he led a successful life.

Originally from the city of perfect weather, San Diego, he found his way to the multi-season and highly erratic East Coast climate, and said he graduated with honors and a degree in industrial technology from Rhode Island College.

He got further training in Switzerland, he said.

He speaks German and Japanese.

He's traveled abroad and had his own business.

But something went awry with a business partner, Howard said.

He didn't go into details, but some sort of threat was uttered, issued or otherwise transmitted and it was given criminal credence.

He pleaded guilty and got probation.

Part of the deal was to stay out of Massachusetts, but he didn't and that led to 18 months split between two of Bristol County Sheriff Thomas M. Hodgson's jails — one in Dartmouth, a 20th century jail about 30 years old, and Ash Street Jail in New Bedford, a dank, dark relic of the 19th century built in 1888.

The split came after a run-in with a gang member who wanted something Howard had.

The gang member and some cronies threatened to beat Howard up if he didn't withdraw from a class at the jail run by UMass Dartmouth teachers and students, he said.

Howard suspected the cronies may have been convinced to risk jail punishment like solitary because they owed the gang member a debt — in cash or ramen noodles, currency in lockup — from one of the incessant poker games, Howard said.

They could pay it off with a few threats, more if needed.

The course in which the gang member was allegedly enthralled was called Transformative Justice and was part of the Inside Out program. The class was limited to 15 inmates and the gang member didn't make the grade.

"I got in, he didn't," Howard said. "He was on the wait list."

But Howard alleges the gang member was less interested in intellectual stimulation than sexual, and aimed to connect with some female students in class.

Howard liked the Inside Out courses, however, and didn't want to leave.

“We wrote a paper every week,” he said. “I got a lot out of it.”

But the run-in ended up running him out.

Gangs and Solitary

Gang members make up a sizable part of population and they use their jail time to recruit rather than reform, Howard said.

“Kids are not in gangs when they come in, but they are when they leave.”

Darling acknowledged that gangs including MS13, Bloods and Crips keep house in the jail and that presents some management problems.

Inmates are moved constantly to keep them away from others who may want to hurt them, or others they may want to hurt.

Howard said his run-in put him in “solitary confinement” for two weeks, for his own protection.

Hodgson prefers the word “segregation” to the term “solitary confinement” when it comes to taking a prisoner out of the general population.

He said there are 16 cells in the segregation unit. And if there’s more than one prisoner in segregation, they can talk.

Inmates can’t come and go from their cells as can the general population, which lives in unlocked cells.

And exercise time is limited to five hours a week outside.

More than one inmate can be outside, but they are separated and can’t have contact. They can, however, talk.

It’s isolating, but not as isolating as “solitary” implies.

Anyway, Howard soon found himself at the less commodious Ash Street Jail where he worked in the laundry and read a lot, mostly biographies to pass the time, out of Dartmouth and out of the class.

Accommodations

Dartmouth and Ash Street both existed when Hodgson arrived on the scene in 1999 for the first of his four six-year terms as sheriff, and he’s working with what he’s got.

While the Dartmouth facility is deemed overcrowded in quarterly reports issued by the state’s Department of Corrections, about 300 percent of its design capacity, Darling said the situation has been improved by creating dormitory-style quarters with several beds in one room larger than the typical cell.

Most cells have two beds, but the confinement is less intense because the doors are not locked.

“So although studies say we are extremely overcrowded, we actually have empty cells here and there,” Darling said.

Meanwhile Ash Street is running below capacity. One figure had it at 89 percent.

Current Quarters

Howard’s current quarters, the Attleboro Motor Inn, has quite a few rooms.

And he’s got one all to himself.

Howard’s also got a toilet, shower and TV — all to himself.

He can lock and unlock his door at will and there’s a phone in his room and a phone in his pocket, twice the number of phones in jail and probably half the price.

The phone in his pocket is a “burner,” a cheap cellphone for which he buys minutes. But it works and it doesn’t cost too much.

He had to buy minutes at the jail too, but they were expensive.

A phone company called Securus pays BCHOC for the opportunity to provide service.

It’s not typical phone service because phone calls are monitored and recorded with special equipment, except calls between inmates and attorneys.

One published report put the cost of a 10-minute call at \$4.60.

And the jail makes beaucoup bucks, as much as \$300,000 a year, the report said.

Hodgson said the cash is funneled back into prison programs to benefit inmates.

It enhances what he considers is an underfunded budget from the state and makes inmates help pay for their own rehabilitation.

Money is also made from high prices in the canteen, where inmates can order food and other items like sneakers.

And U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement pays the jail \$99 a day for immigrants living in the country illegally who are accused of crimes and awaiting transfer to ICE custody.

“The profits we make in these programs are reinvested in the inmates,” Hodgson said. “They’re helping to pay for their own rehabilitation and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

Being a Republican sheriff in an overwhelmingly Democrat state makes the problem worse, he said.

“This operation has always been at the bottom of the heap with funding,” Hodgson said.

Other opinions

Some think there is something wrong with it.

Howard described phone expenses as “outrageous” and said he kept phone contact with the outside world at a minimum as a result.

And lawyers for Prisoners Legal Services, a Boston-based nonprofit that helps inmates with problems ranging from a lack of medical help to guard assaults, has filed suit to change the system. It’s often a financial burden for an inmate’s family, which has to pay the bills.

PLS calls the flood of cash “illegal kickbacks” and wants to make phone calls free or at least sold at market rates.

BCHOC isn’t the only jail that uses the expensive service. It’s widespread across the country. But there is opposition.

“There’s a huge national movement, and here, to push back against the profiteering,” PLS lawyer Bonnie Tenneriello said.

She said PLS has taken BCHOC to court before and won.

Early in Hodgson’s career he charged inmates \$5 a day rent and also charged for haircuts. The idea was to teach inmates responsibility and save taxpayers money.

Hodgson lost that one in a decision by the Supreme Judicial Court. Fees are not authorized by law.

Tenneriello believes the phone case has a good chance.

“This looks like he’s charging a fee through the back door,” she said.

PLS has other cases. One looks to restrict the use of solitary confinement, or segregation, as Hodgson calls it.

“Solitary confinement is detrimental to everybody and for prisoners with a serious mental health issue it’s worse,” Tenneriello said.

“Instead of being given the tools to be successful in the general population, they are warehoused in solitary.”

If it’s the main punishment for inmates out of line, it’s overused, she said.

“When solitary is the only hammer, every problem looks like a nail,” Tenneriello said.

PLS director Liz Matos said BCHOC and other jails that use solitary need a range of punishments.

Less serious problems should get less serious punishments, like a temporary loss of phone or canteen privileges, she said.

Other problems

PLS lawyers described Hodgson's jail as one with a "punitive" culture, with sometimes tragic consequences.

Hodgson disagrees.

It's tough, but that's crucial, he said.

"Accountability is critically important for success here," he said. "Not only for staff, but the inmate population. Our whole philosophy is, while people are here they have a right to make choices, but the choices are limited. We want them to assimilate back into society in a way that will make it more likely for them to succeed."

While Howard disputes the existence of some programs, Hodgson ticks off a list that includes high school diploma, food sanitation and community service programs, the last of which has inmates leave the jail and do projects in towns and cities to save taxpayers money.

And there are programs outsiders bring in, such as Inside Out from UMass Dartmouth and Getting Ahead While Getting Out, an inmate reentry program run by Attleboro's St. Vincent de Paul Society.

Those help enhance their self-esteem and provide relief from the daily grind of lockup, Hodgson said.

And the grind is tough, especially for first-time convicts or people who have not been convicted but are awaiting trial in jail because they can't make bail.

That strain, accompanied by undetected or inadequately treated mental health problems inside or outside of jail, cause some to take their own lives.

In BCHOC, there were three suicides in 2015 and four in 2016.

The jail came under scrutiny.

In 2017, the number went down to two and then zero last year and zero so far in 2019.

Hodgson doesn't believe the deaths came from negligence on the part of his staff.

Exterior social conditions such as rampant drug addiction and an increase of people with serious mental health issues, which the jail has a limited capacity to deal with, were the main causes, he said.

"What got worse was the opioid crisis and the mental health problems," Hodgson said.

And according to statistics from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, suicides across the nation rose at the same time. It was not just a jail phenomenon.

In addition, Hodgson claimed that as many as 6 percent of patients in mental health hospitals kill themselves while under the care of experts trained to detect the signs of an impending attempt.

Sometimes it's not possible to anticipate a suicide, he said. Even experts in the field fail.

"That's their expertise, but are we going to say they're not doing their job? Of course not," Hodgson said.

Nonetheless, there's a wrongful death suit pending against BCHOC.

Hodgson's philosophy

TVs are few and far between in the county lockup.

It was one of the first things he changed when he became sheriff 21 years ago on a law-and-order platform.

TVs were banned.

"They can't come to jail and expect to lie around and watch TV all day," Hodgson said.

Weightlifting equipment went too; there was grumbling for a while, but it passed, jail Superintendent Steven Souza said.

It appears to be a philosophy Hodgson's constituents like.

He's been opposed in three elections and won each time. In 2016, he was unopposed.

The next campaign begins in 2022 for the 65-year-old sheriff, and he says he will be running.

His aim is to run the jail efficiently with an eye to saving taxpayers money.

His constituents like the tough attitude, but some criminals don't. Hodgson said some have refused to plead to a lesser offense because they'd rather go to state prison than BCHOC.

"They'd rather go to a place where they don't have to focus on rehabilitation and be accountable," Hodgson said.

He said his philosophy is to help, not hurt. A kind of tough love.

“I don’t hate you guys,” he said, quoting what he says to inmates. “I don’t want you to come back. I get that you didn’t have the advantages others had when you were growing up.”

Howard’s Plight

There’s no weightlifting equipment at Attleboro Motor Inn either, but the accommodations are a big improvement.

Gyms are dime a dozen on the street.

However, there are drawbacks.

Some guests may look familiar.

The South Attleboro motel on the Pawtucket line is in one of the city’s grittiest neighborhoods and its name pops up in a number of Sun Chronicle crime stories.

Police recently conducted a prostitution sting there.

There have been drug arrests and one man, who’s car was first spotted by police in its parking lot, was later charged with a gun violation.

That’s not a good environment for someone just cut loose from incarceration.

No telling what innocent happenstance could land Howard back in the clink.

Another drawback is the cost — \$100 a night.

Howard can afford it, for the moment at least, because generous family members pay for it.

“If I didn’t have my family, I don’t know what I’d do,” he said.

REENTRY

Despite his desperate times, Howard is one of the lucky ones.

He has an education, business experience, a family helping him with cash and the St. Vincent de Paul Society’s Reentry Program.

The program runs out of a second floor office in the former Richardson School on Pine Street.

Many others released from jail don’t have any of those things.

The reentry program, now in its third year, is working to fill that gap. And it’s a vital gap to fill.

If inmates don’t have immediate support upon release, they could find themselves on the way back to jail sooner rather than later, volunteers said.

“The first 72 hours is the time when there’s the greatest risk to re-offend,” former probation officer and SVDP volunteer Paul Hodge said. “One of the main goals is to reduce the recidivism rate.”

But there’s a dearth of help for ex-inmates, SVDP volunteer Diana Reeves said.

The local program is just one of two that she knows of. The other is in Exeter, N.H., she said.

Her husband, Peter Kortright, said the effort is new in these parts, but critical.

“Reentry is very much in its infancy here,” he said. “Even in some of the most progressive areas, at the end of jail you get dumped on the street and good luck to you. If these guys don’t get some help, they go back into jail, so it’s a revolving door.”

Hodgson, who’s a big backer of the SVDP’s reentry program, said quantifying BCHOC’s recidivism rate is difficult.

Among other reasons, inmates may re-offend in other places, which skews statistics.

But there is recidivism.

So much so, Howard said guards at BCHOC joke about it.

“So and so is doing life on the installment plan,” Howard quoted them as saying.

In the meantime, SVDP’s Reentry Program has helped about 160 former inmates so far.

It’s now in its third workshop for inmates about to be released from Bristol County jail.

It’s called Getting Ahead While Getting Out.

The 45-hour program helps inmates identify goals, prepare a reentry plan and prepare a resource list, places to find help.

Reeves said the goal is to get to the jail to each quarter maximize the number of inmates they can help, and there are many who need it.

“Most of the men about to be released are desperate for help,” Kortright said. “We’re trying to turn it around a little. We can help them get into a sober house, get clothes, get a place to live.”

Howard is grateful for the help he’s getting. Once he’s settled with a job and an apartment, it may be his turn.

“I’d like to be in a position to give back to you guys,” he said.