

Department Implements Innovative Improvements to Disciplinary Segregation Unit

By: Richard McCarthy

The Hampden County Sheriff's Department serves the urban area of Springfield/Chicopee/Holyoke in the western part of Massachusetts and is part of the Large Jail Network. Although the count has gone over 2000 in the past, there are currently 1600 individuals in the custody of the Hampden County Sheriff's Department, including both sentenced offenders and pre-trial detainees. In Massachusetts's county correctional facilities, sentenced individuals are usually serving time for drug offences, burglary, larceny, driving under the influence, domestic violence, assault, etc., with sentences of 2 1/2 years or less. Those awaiting trial are often charged with more major felonies, such as murder, rape, armed robbery, etc.. In many states, everyone sentenced to one year or more is sent to state prison, so Massachusetts Sheriffs have in their sentenced population many inmates who would in other states be sent to state prison. In that sense, Massachusetts Sheriffs are "hybrids", so to speak, whose experience is applicable to both county jails and state prisons throughout the country.

Up until January of 2008, the Hampden County Sheriff's Department maintained a Special Management Unit (aka Disciplinary Unit or Segregation Unit) that was similar in many ways to the 23-hour-a-day lockdown units in jails and prisons throughout the country.

Although its segregation unit had never been intended to be a long term, filled to capacity and beyond, major housing unit, it had become one over the years. It had become a repository for inmates who were difficult to manage in regular housing units, an out-of-sight, out-of-mind, jail within a jail.

We looked around and saw that while our philosophy of corrections was to "challenge" inmates to build a law-abiding life in a safe, secure, orderly, lawful and productive environment and to reward inmates for positive behavior, this philosophy seemed to stop at the door of our segregation unit where we had only "sticks", so to speak, and no "carrots". We saw that while our operational philosophy as a whole institution was not to hold people for the most amount of time in the grimmest possible conditions, with no immediate and accessible avenues to better their lot, an argument could be made that our segregation unit was operating on that premise.

It was also known that there is a concern that segregation's isolated, stark environment may worsen the mental health of some inmates, exacerbating or

precipitating mental illnesses in a process know as "decompensation". We knew that any mental deterioration of an incarcerant takes not only a dire toll on the individual involved, but extracts a cost from those who work in our facility, as well as from the community when the individual is released.

In January of 2008, Sheriff Michael J. Ashe, Jr. formed a working staff committee with representatives from every security level and satellite facility throughout the department, and from various areas of operations such as security, classification, human services and forensics, uniform and non-uniform, to thrash out proposed changes to the unit that would enable the Special Management Unit to be what it was meant to be: a place to address and improve problematic behavior, rather than a place to give it a home.

Ten months later the staff committee presented its hard-worked-to proposals to the Sheriff.

The first change put in place on the unit itself was to institute a behavioral program through which inmates can earn privileges in segregation and shorten their stay.

An evaluation system was established, based on inmate cooperation with unit staff and procedures, cleanliness and orderliness of cells, personal hygiene, and avoidance of actions or noise assaultive of others.

Segregation inmates who consistently achieve a positive evaluation are given extra time out of their cell, one at a time, in a cell that has been converted into a "wellness area". This wellness cell was designed and created to best meet budget restrictions and pay close attention to the safety and security of staff and inmates. Exercise equipment in the cell includes a stability ball, medicine balls varying in weight and size, a foam roller, a stationary bike, and a mini-stepper. Free weights or a chin-up bar are not considered as feasible because of risks associated with the safety of officers or risks of injury to an inmate.

Segregation inmates with positive evaluations earn 1/2-hour stays alone in this wellness cell. 50% of segregation inmates achieve consistent positive evaluations to qualify for time in this cell and utilize the privilege.

Those who demonstrate sustained good behavior also have a chance for once-a-week group exercise in the facility's exercise area when the area is not utilized by general population inmates.

Consistent positive evaluations can also translate into time off the inmate's stay on the Special Management Unit. This bears some resemblance to the earned good time system in the larger jail, with the differences that there are no fixed amounts of time earned; time earned is obviously less because it is proportionate to the length of time in segregation; and early release is not to the general population, but to a completion of the lockdown situation in a regular living unit until the full lockdown time is served.

We also decided to attempt to introduce some basic programs in segregation, and 70% of inmates receive consistent positive evaluations to qualify for these programs and utilize the opportunity. These programs include gang deprogramming, mental health, substance abuse, vocational counseling, employment and housing preparedness, and education. Inmates literally attend these programs in shackles and cuffs to assure the safety of staff, but they attend them nonetheless and are not disruptive. Although the content of the programming may not be as important to them as the time out of their cells, their attendance at these programs at least gives them an opportunity to spend time exposed to the solutions rather than the problems. In addition, the existence of such programs provides one more "carrot" of time out of their cells for inmates to earn through positive evaluations.

The weekly Treatment Staff meeting, attended by clinical, program and counseling staff, systematically reviews inmates to determine which inmates would be appropriate for Mental Health and/or Substance Abuse Programming.

We also utilize our mental health vendor for triage on the unit.

To counter the mental deterioration that can take place in lockdown units, inmates have access to in-cell programming for one hour, twice a week, through the use of an MP3 Headset System.

These headphones are best conceptualized as electronic books, and are programmed to offer inmates programs such as: "Alcoholism and Addiction Care"; "Surviving in an Angry World"; "Conquering Fears and Anxiety"; "Bridging Differences/Dealing with Transition/Avoiding Stress"; "Chicken Soup for the Father's Soul"; "Family First"; and "Healing Anger and Depression".

Also offered in these headphones are soundscapes from nature; "Introduction to Meditation"; "The Power of Simple Prayer"; "Relax Rx"; and classical and contemporary music, all of which can work against any possible mental deterioration.

These headphones were especially selected for their durability and the fact that they did not lend themselves to be used or fashioned as weapons, in whole or in part.

The headphones cost only \$33.25 per unit.

Headphones are offered twice-a-week, not only to those who consistently receive positive evaluations, but also to inmates who are struggling with mental health issues. Fully 80% of segregation inmates utilize MP3-headphones, and there has been absolutely no problem with their destroying or purposely damaging them. Inmates obviously value this privilege and are not looking to lose it by purposely mistreating the headphones.

In addition to the changes in the unit, efforts have been made in classification to hold down the numbers in segregation.

The uniform Captains of each housing unit meet weekly to develop a corrective action plan for each inmate in the Special Management Unit, which may include their early re-entry into lockdown in a general population unit.

The corrective action plan is continued once the inmate steps down to general housing from segregation, whether through early release or not, by staff holding a re-entry session with the inmate to discuss the inmate's plan, expectations of the inmate, and support services available for transition to general housing. It cannot be overemphasized how essential face-to-face contact with the inmate is to establish their "buy-in" and to enhance their chances for successful avoidance of segregation in the future. Indeed, a lack of this connectedness to others is a primary reason why so many failed to get out, and stay out, of segregation in the past.

Step-down units are available in general population to allow inmates, based upon their classification and behavior, to move from Segregation to a general population pod, where follow-up in regards to behavioral compliance and program needs and expectations is monitored, including planning for After Incarceration Support Services.

Individual and group meetings with the inmates are sometimes necessary in order to cajole those who are appropriate to classify to general population to make the transition to move out of Segregation and inform them that staff support is available for this process. It is possible, as unlikely as it seems, for Segregation inmates to become "institutionalized" to the unit.

The above changes have resulted in considerably less inmates being held in the segregation unit, with no concomitant rise in assaults in the general population. In other words, our institution has evidenced itself to be capable of keeping more inmates in the general population without making the facility and its staff less safe. Incidents in the segregation unit have decreased. Staff attitudes about working in the special management unit have decidedly become more positive.

We are satisfied that the changes we have instituted have resulted in our Special Management Unit being a place where we address and correct pathology, rather than a place to give it a home where it can fester and grow, breeding only frustration, stagnation and new crime.

These changes were broad and deep and consistent with the department's philosophy of always striving for a positive, productive environment in the inherently negative business of corrections. We realize that not every institution seeking to improve its segregation unit would want to embrace and implement all the changes that we put in place. By the same token, we believe that any facility or department might consider some of the general and specific ways that we sought to make our segregation unit consistent with our overall effort to challenge inmates with the tools and directions to build a law-abiding life in an atmosphere as free from violence as we can possibly make it.

Anyone wishing to learn more about changes to the Hampden County Special Management Unit, can contact Assistant Deputy Superintendent William Champagne at (413) 547-8000 extension 2701 or e-mail bill.champagne@sdh.state.ma.us