

VOLUNTEER OMBUDS SITE VISIT REPORT
OLYMPIC CORRECTIONS CENTER
OCTOBER 8, 2020

I arrived at 8:45 am and was quickly checked in. Met with Superintendent Jason Bennett and went over the agenda for my visit. Superintendent Bennett said that he would be my guide during the day as the schedule for mandatory furlough days had left him shorthanded at times during the week. He also asked me if I would like to have a Covid 19 test, as they are now able to test staff and visitors. I thought it to be a good idea to make sure that I was not bringing the virus to OCC, and agreed to a test at 1:30 p.m. As we walked through the various buildings, I observed porters cleaning, wiping off walls, railings and doors. While Superintendent Bennett was showing me a kiosk and an additional terminal obtained in response to the Covid crisis, I noticed several people conducting cleaning operations on a phone bank. Throughout my visit I asked each porter I encountered about the adequacy of supplies, and each replied that they had plenty of PPE and cleaning supplies.

Our first stop was in the mechanical shop, which we entered through a side door, unannounced. Everyone was wearing masks. Several people were at their desks drinking coffee (they were on break) and had lowered their mask/face covering while drinking. Each replaced it as soon as they saw us enter the shop space. Everyone else not on a break was wearing face coverings while working. The atmosphere was relaxed and quiet with people working on various tasks. Individuals quickly recognized and greeted the Superintendent, responding to questions he had about their work.

We moved from the mechanical shop, to a woodworking area, with several individuals working on projects. I was told that OCC does laser engraving and carvings for the department and that they had also built scale models of construction equipment, railroad trains and logging vehicles all made of wood. These models would be donated to various community organizations for charity auctions. One young man was working on a gasoline tanker truck that he had just finished (photo on the right side of the page). He pointed to several other projects and told me that prior to coming here (OCC) he had not worked in wood or built anything like the projects he was working on. The workmanship was amazing and he was very keen to show the special details he had included in this particular model. As in the mechanical shop, everyone was masked, and busy with their work.



During our initial meeting I told Superintendent Bennet that the OCO's office had received some comments and concerns about the TC program based in the Hoh living unit. Many of the living units have had significant changes in the configuration of the unit to allow more social distancing between residents because of COVID -19. We quickly ducked into a unit with cells that would normally house two people on a single stack of bunk beds. In response to the need for social distance, the beds were unstacked and moved to one wall. A sheet of plywood was

placed securely between the beds. While somewhat cramped, there was adequate space to move around the cell. Several individuals were sleeping (unmasked) as they had late night or early hours shifts, and we did not wake them. If the cells were too small for the side by side configuration top bunks had been removed and placed in areas that were formerly common area spaces. One large room had a television mounted away from the wall and pointed towards the opposite wall where 5 or 6 beds and lockers had been located with a low plywood wall separating each bed and locker. Each space allowed social distance of slightly more than 6 feet (photos below).



From these living spaces we then met with the Assistant Manager of the Therapeutic Community program in her office. We met with her for about 20 minutes and I asked about the program, how it is organized, what it does and how it goes about its mission. She showed us the space that the current meetings of those in the program are held in. Before the Covid crisis these meetings were held in the large commons room that now has been converted into temporary living quarters, to enable social distancing. American Behavioral Services, is the contractor for the Chemical Dependency program, but other than the Assistant Manager there were no other managers or staff in the office at the time of our visit. As it was nearly noon we walked out and Superintendent Bennett pointed out to areas that were previously considered “out of bounds” that have been opened up and utilized for recreation activities for the incarcerated.

We proceeded to the kitchen area which was serving lunch, and were able to grab lunch trays with food placed on the tray directly from the pots that everyone in line was being served from.

Lunch was a beef stew, white rice, a roll and celery. I was offered fresh fruit, which I declined, and a packet with a sweet fruit flavored drink, made by mixing with tap



water. We went to a nearby conference room to eat our lunch. The stew was warm as was the white rice. I combined the two while we were talking, but noticed that the rice had cooled considerably and that in less than 5 minutes from being served it was only being warmed by the stew. The stew was seasoned and very tasty. Good texture, and despite the now cold rice, a good and filling meal. The roll was a bit bland in taste, but good in texture and crust.

I wanted to look at the medical facility and as the time for my appointment for the Covid test was approaching, we walked over where the test would be administered. On the way over we did a quick walk through of another living unit. I asked about OCO information posters and Superintendent Bennett showed me a large protected glass case across the hallway from a bank of phones. As was observed previously, this phone bank was also being wiped down by a porter. We looked at a room similar to those in the Hoh unit, with bunks reconfigured for additional distance between beds. We proceeded to the medical area for my test.

The person obtaining the samples had full PPE, and handed me the swab. I did as I was instructed and was told that if I tested positive I would be called by the lab (it was negative). Superintendent Bennett drove me over to that part of the camp where the Tier Rep meeting would be held. I explained to the reps that I am a volunteer with the OCO's office, and I once was incarcerated in Washington and I am a former lawyer. I purposely do not ask for people's names, nor can I promise action on their behalf or as a group. My purpose is to listen, learn, and to pass on relevant concerns and issues to the OCO's office. Several people quickly said that they had been pulled off their work details for this meeting, and I asked if they were concerned about being diverted for our meeting, several laughed and said, that if it got them out of work, it was fine with them. I opened the meeting for comments and concerns.

The first concern voiced was the lack of recreational opportunities because of Covid. One individual stated that he wanted to see weight deck time restored as well as basketball. For him the need for social distancing doesn't really hold up. He said that OCC is a remote camp, in a remote part of the state. There is only one way for the virus to come in and that is via staff and visitors. And as there is no visiting as of yet for the incarcerated, this is a closed system. There is constant interaction with each other, at work, in the living areas and during sessions within the TC (Therapeutic Community). There are no visits, just television, work and when the weather is nice, limited outside recreation. The individual then posed a question: "How is playing basketball or lifting weights, exposing ourselves any more to Covid when that is already happening every day, because of the interactions with staff or by being in the TC? We need this, this Covid thing is wearing us down."

That provided a segue for a discussion about the TC and the Chemical Dependency program. Several reps shared concerns that people that they knew (no one was specific) had been in the program for a long time. One person said that they were placing people in the program that didn't have it part of their J&S and that a treatment program wasn't appropriate for them. It appeared that once people entered the program, they didn't progress much past 3.5 on the evaluation scale and as a result were not advancing towards work release or GRE, and that this had been an issue raised previously, but one that has gone on for some time. The focus was not

one person or camp administration but issue appeared to be on the criteria that is used to evaluate individuals. This made up the bulk of our discussion time, and while some specific instances were brought up, they focused on the overall belief that the only way out of the program was by completing a person's sentence, and not the program.

One final issue was the concern that staff is very tight with each other and that the disciplinary process appears to be unfairly weighted towards staff when infractions are given out. There was also a series of questions about when OCC would be allowing visitors, even for an hour. As we began to wind the meeting down, one person asked if my input based on the meeting would get anything done or even be listened to. And before I had a chance to respond, another said, Covid is wearing on everyone.

I closed my visit with a final debrief with the Superintendent, in which I shared the concerns I had heard, particularly about recreation and the reported inability to progress out of the TC program.

Respectfully Submitted,

Zachary A. Kinneman
Volunteer, Office of the Corrections Ombuds



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DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS
P.O. Box 41100 • Olympia, Washington 98504-1110

December 3, 2020

Zak Kinneman
Office of Corrections Ombuds
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Olympia, WA 98505

Dear Mr. Kinneman:

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to share our facility operations with you and part of our response to COVID 19, to include our expanded housing units, enhanced cleaning protocols and testing procedures. I appreciate your thoughtful interactions and the opportunity provided for us to demonstrate our commitment to the health and safety of the population.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "J. M. Bennett".

Jason M. Bennett, Superintendent
Olympic Corrections Center