

Prison Journal No. 6, April 30, 2006

Doing Time at the Jackson County Jail “On the Cheap”

I do not believe Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz had the Jackson County Jail in Holton, KS, in mind when she said, “There’s no place like home.” Life here at Jackson County has lightened up some since last I wrote. After a week of darkness in our cell, the burned out light bulb was replaced. This brought immediate improvement to my life. I’m now able to read and write in my cell instead of in the Common Room where the TV blares and the noise is most intense. I was not sure how long this enlightenment was going to last. One of my cell mates, a 30 year old Federal inmate starting a ten year sentence for drug-dealing, was not happy with our lighted cell. He had gotten used to sleeping in the darkness during the day. For a few days after the light was replaced, he kept trying to break the light fixture with his shoe. Lucky for me, he was moved to another Mod before he could finish the job.

Four weeks into my stay here and I’ve learned more about Jackson County and Holton, KS, where this jail is located. Jackson County is a sparsely populated rural county with the Pottawattamie Indian Reservation right in the middle of the county on an eleven mile by eleven mile Reservation. The Reservation runs a large casino operation. Holton is the largest town in the county with 3,000 people. It is also the county seat and a “bedroom” community. Holton is 30 miles from Topeka, KS, and most people work in Topeka. Its biggest employer is a meat packing plant that hires mostly Hispanics.

The county got into the “for profit” jail business about ten years ago. They built themselves a hundred bed holding facility and started taking overflow inmates from Johnson County where Kansas City, KS, is located and Federal prisoners awaiting trial or in transit into the Federal prison system. On average, the jail houses about 25 inmates who are from Jackson County. The rest are paying customers. The idea was sold to the taxpayers of Jackson County because no county tax monies would be used to build and operate the jail.

Ten years later and the facility now holds over 130 inmates, the extra slots created by tripling two men cells plus adding extra bunk beds and boats in already full Mods. A boat is a plastic container in which bed mats can fit. They are called boats because they look like small rowboats.

I do not know how much money Jackson County receives for housing an inmate per night from Johnson County and the U.S. Marshals. I do know anyone being held in the Jackson County Jail is being locked up “on the cheap.”

The first thing an inmate notices when entering the Jackson County Jail is the poor condition of the facility. Only ten years old, the place is falling apart. In our Mod alone, four of the eight cell doors do not lock down. These doors are jammed. My 3-man cell door cannot close. In two cells in our Mod, the tinted windows that let sunlight in were busted out by inmates but never replaced. They’re just boarded up. I’m told this is a common condition throughout the jail. The walls are painted with very cheap paint. They are peeling and retain dirt easily. The air conditioning system either freezes us out or doesn’t work. Power is often cut off, broken breakers. I’m hoping I’m out of here before the high temps of summer put extra strain on the system. It is obvious little or no money is being spent to maintain this facility except what absolutely is needed.

The jail-issued clothing, bedding and towels are not much more than rags. There are dishtowels at the Des Moines Catholic Worker larger than the one towel each inmate is

issued. When the place is full, there is not enough clothing to go around. Inmates are constantly trading with outgoing inmates for a better set of clothing and bedding.

Hygiene is a real problem here. The place looks and feels dirty. Cleaning materials for our Mod consist of a mop and a bucket with mostly dirty soap water and a small white plastic container with bleach water and a 4 inch by 8 inch rag, a dirty broom and filthy dustpan. These cleaning materials are brought in and out of the Mod three times a day around meal times. The two shower stalls in our Mod are really filthy. The shower curtain is grimy. It hangs by two thin strings. The walls and floors and drain are ugly. Whenever I take a shower, I make sure I'm wearing my shower shoes and I do not touch the walls.

Toilet paper is the most valued commodity here, something to die for! Each inmate is issued two rolls of toilet paper a week plus each cell gets one extra roll a week. Now this may sound like more than enough except that the toilet paper here serves a multitude of purposes. It's the only thing we have to clean our sinks, table tops, plastic bowls, coffee cups and spoons. If you drop something on the floor, toilet paper is all you have to clean it up. If you want a napkin at your meal, toilet paper is your only option.

The way these all steel combo sink and toilet units are built, every time a guy pees, the toilet seat has to be wiped clean. Two rolls a week barely covers the necessities and getting an extra roll from a guard is next to impossible.

We have two phones in our Mod. They are rarely used. Why? Because a 15 minute collect call costs \$20 each! I have had to limit the number of calls I make to once a week to the Des Moines Catholic Worker and two a week to Laney Green, the love of my life, and sporadic calls to family.

The medical scene here is scary. A doctor and physician's assistant come to the jail once a week. An inmate must put in an Inmate Medical Request Form at least two days before the scheduled day. The first month an inmate is here, all visits to the doctor and meds are free. After the first month, each time you request to see the doctor costs you \$10 and every prescription drug costs you \$3.

Space is so limited that when you do see a doctor or physician's assistant, you see them in the same space where we were booked into the jail. There are no medical personnel on site. All meds are administered by guards. All medical assessments on site are made by guards.

Luckily, I'm getting the meds I need for which I am most grateful. God forbid I should get sick here and need immediate medical attention. Take Paulo, for example. Paulo broke two bones in his hand in a fight. The doctor at the local hospital said he needed to see a bone specialist. They wrapped his broken hand and sent him back to the jail. Paulo is a Federal inmate and since his injury is not life threatening, the US Marshals must give the ok for him to see a bone specialist. It took him two days in our Mod before he even got pain pills. And he was given pain pills only after he took the broom handle and started pounding on the door leading into the Mod to get the guard's attention. Fourteen days now and he has yet to get permission from the Marshals to see a bone specialist.

Since space is so limited, there is no classroom or chapel area. The Sunday night Catholic communion services are held in the Rec area. Our Mod is called out for Catholic services at 8:30 pm. Mary and Don, two faithful volunteers from St. Dominic's Catholic Parish in Holton, have been coming to the jail for the last eight years. They share the readings of the day and distribute communion. It's a humble and simple service and I am most grateful for the Word

and Eucharist they bring us. They are also the folks who got me a Catholic Bible and the missalette, two needed tools for my lectionary reflections.

The library here is a joke. I've been here four weeks and have been to the library once. It consists of a wooden book rack that they wheel into the Rec area. Half of the book covers are worn off. Most are rejects from the local public library. It is so lame. Luckily, I've started receiving a subscription to the *New York Times* which is keeping me up to current world events. And I need to confess I am four volumes into the eight volume trashy Christian series, *Left Behind*. We have a whole set of them in our Mod. I'm trying to read them slowly in hopes I'll be moved before I'm done.

I can't help feeling somebody is making a lot of money from operating this jail. It's a place begging a good audit and an investigative reporter, somebody who can follow the money.

There are pluses to being here. The food gets high marks as county jails go. The jail store is well stocked and each mod has a microwave. There are no guards in the Mods. We are policed by cameras. Guys prefer guardless Mods. It is louder and more rowdy. They allow gym clothes and tennis shoes if they are worn into the jail. I got a pair of gym shorts from a guy leaving and I'm renting a pair of tennis shoes for \$2 of store goods a week. This has greatly improved my physical exercise options. I'm now doing a combo one hour walk, stair climbing and sung rosary every morning and a one hour walk in the afternoon. Mostly though, I'm being treated well by the men in my Mod. I've been here long enough that the old timers in the Mod look after me. In my next prison journal, I hope to write more about everyday life in my Mod and the men I share this time and space with.

Folks have been writing me a bout how wonderful spring is this year. I'm afraid I'll be missing this year's spring season. We are completely shut off from the outdoors: no smell, touch or sight. I'm living a real cave-like existence. The only spring I'll experience this year is the great support and love I've been given by so many good friends through this captivity. And I say, thank you all! Amen.

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