

Valley State Prison

The Madera County Grand Jury (MCGJ) conducted the mandated detentions facility inspection at the Valley State Prison, located at 21633 Avenue 24 in Chowchilla, CA on November 4, 2022, and December 15, 2022. The MCGJ met with the Public Information Officer (PIO) and was provided an overview and written response to questions about the institution. In addition, the Warden at Valley State Prison (VSP) toured the institution with the MCGJ and answered questions.

General Information: Valley State Prison is primarily a Level 1/ Level 2 men's facility which includes inmates who are ex-gang members, under protective custody, and sentenced to life. The capacity of the facility is 3,034 inmates, and the population on November 4, 2022, was 3,023, which is within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation capacity guidelines.

Over the last two years, inmates were placed on a "One-on-One watch". "One-on-One watch" means twenty-four-hour observation for the safety of the inmates and staff.

Staffing: California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) is a division of California State Adult Institutions. This prison is a Level One and Two minimum security institution.

Staffing standards are designed to provide a "base" staffing level, which is the minimum staffing necessary for institutions to operate. This allows for different levels of staffing to be provided as augmentations for design, special programs, and custody levels one and two. For example, VSP prison is a level one and two men's facility, meaning more staff is required depending on the number of inmates in custody. Additional augmentations-number of staff required per inmate are given for various levels of healthcare needs of the inmate populations.

Local and State Inspections: Fire inspections of the facility take place every quarter and are current with the last inspection in September of 2022. The state conducted a medical inspection that took place over a three-day period in March 2022.

In January 2022, the State Corrections Standards Authority inspection took place in conjunction with a Security Audit. The State Corrections Standards Authority examines safety and security issues concerning buildings, housing units, kitchen/food service safety, medical/dental facilities, and the like. The Security Audit investigates safety concerns including automatic doors, fencing/razor wire, lighting, and staff/visitor processing. No violations or concerns were documented or observed.

Conditions of the grounds: Evidence of a well-groomed landscape was observed in part at VSP. The entrance to the facility, surrounding areas of the administration building, and parking lot were observed to be well taken care of. The landscaping around all inmate housing units consists of well-maintained bushes and flowers. The landscaping around the housing is maintained by the inmates. In the main yard, the tranquil and picturesque Prayer Garden and the dog park are also well-maintained by the inmates.

However, the “green turf” areas within the institution yards (A, B, C, and D yards), and the main yard have suffered damage due to the California drought restrictions on watering green turf.

Housing: Inmates are housed at a maximum capacity of eight inmates per cell at VSP. Each cell that MCGJ observed had beds made with clean linens, and lockers containing personal items were secured. Each cell had four bunks beds, two sinks with mirrors, a toilet, and a shower. Correctional Officers conduct daily random searches of various rooms in the housing unit.

Orientation of inmates at intake: All inmates arriving at Receiving and Release (R&R) are given an orientation packet and briefing which includes a Prison Rape/Elimination Act (PREA) brochure and a self-assessment guide, which helps to gauge their level of education, language skills, and maturity. The Inmates are given an explanation concerning PREA and instructions on how to report, witnessing, or being a victim of sexual violence. A signature is required by inmates after the training. Safety issues are also addressed with inmates. A Disability Placement Program (DPP), a 602 grievance, and an 1824 Reasonable Accommodation Request are explained.

During a typical inmate interview, the individual file is reviewed, and the inmate is informed that VSP is a Non-Designated Institution, and they will be housed with other races. Safety concerns are addressed, and housing restrictions are reviewed for proper placement.

Healthcare: There are two mental health programs provided at VSP. Enhanced Outpatient Program (EOP), which provides weekly individual therapy, and a minimum of 10 hours of group treatment. Correctional Clinical Case Management Services (CCCMS) provide individual therapy from 30-90 minutes. These services are provided by a team of Physicians, mid-level providers, Registered Nurses, Licensed Vocational Nurses, Licensed Psychiatric Technicians, Medical Assistants, and Certified Nurses Aides. Inmates also have access to behavioral health services provided by Psychologists, Social Workers, Psychiatrists, Recreational Therapists, predoctoral Interns, and practicum students.

Discipline of inmates: A progressive discipline process for conduct violations are handled in accordance with the California Code of Regulations Title 15. There are three steps of discipline: verbal, counseling, and violation reports.

Kitchens: The MCGJ toured one of the satellite kitchens as well as the main kitchen at VSP, which included a kosher kitchen. Both kitchens were observed to be sanitary and well-organized. Inmates working in the kitchens are required to be cleared by medical services and complete a 52-week food service training program, which qualifies them in food preparation and food handling.

Personal appearance and Attitudes of inmates: Throughout the institution, inmates were properly dressed, well groomed, and appeared to be using proper hygiene.

The MCGJ spoke with and interviewed several inmates throughout the institution who were receptive to talking with the MCGJ and spoke highly of the institution and its various programs for their rehabilitation with an upbeat and positive attitude.

Programs/Vocational: Vocational programs offered to inmates at VSP include masonry, cosmetology, small engines, welding, electrical, computer technologies, and an optical program.

Optical Program: An optical production facility is located at VSP. This operation makes lenses for Medi-cal patients in Northern California. At the time of the MCGJ inspection, approximately 70 inmates were working in the optical center. Upon completing the program, the inmates will receive certification that can help them gain employment when released.

Programs/Educational: The VSP employs 40 credentialed teachers. The classes offered are Adult Basic Education 1(1st - 3rd grades), 2(4th - 6th grades), and 3(7th - 9th grades), high school GED, which is earned through Valley State Adult School. The AA degrees are earned through Merced City College. The BA degrees are earned through Fresno State University.

Family Visiting Areas: Weekly visits are held in one of two visiting rooms in the institution. The visits with family are up to six hours. All visitors must be pre-approved and screened before entering the institution. Family conjugal visits are determined by the inmate's counselor and behavior. Inmates must apply for the visit and they can be granted every 90 days.

Dog Training Program: The VSP has a dog training program. Inmates work, live with, and train previously abandoned and neglected dogs in basic commands for one year. After the dogs learn basic commands, the inmates train the dogs to assist in a home setting. The dogs are then able to retrieve specific personal items, open and close doors, operate and access emergency assistance buttons.

Through this program, inmates take on the responsibility of caring for a dog who had been neglected or abandoned. During the process of taking care of the dogs, the inmates claim to learn compassion, confidence, and responsibility. As a result, both inmates and dogs have an opportunity for an improved life.

Findings:

1. The MCGJ finds that the Prayer Garden and the Dog Park grounds are well maintained by the inmates.
2. The MCGJ finds that the optical program provides training and job opportunities for inmates upon release.
3. The MCGJ finds that the dog training program provides inmates with the opportunity to develop compassion, confidence, and responsibility.

Recommendations:

1. The MCGJ recommends that inmates continue to maintain the Prayer Garden and the Dog Park.
2. The MCGJ recommends that the optical facility program continue to provide training and job opportunities for inmates.
3. The MCGJ recommends that the dog training program continue.

Required Respondents: Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933 and 933.05, the Grand Jury request responses as follows:

From the following elected official within 60 days:

Governor Gavin Newsom
1021 O Street 9000
Sacramento, CA 95841

Invited Respondents: Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933 and 933.05, the Grand Jury request responses as follows:

From the following governing bodies with 90 days:

M. MCVAY
Warden (A)
Valley State Prison
21633 Avenue 24
Chowchilla, CA 93610