

Valley State Prison

On November 17, 2023, the Madera County Grand Jury (MCGJ) completed an inspection of Valley State Prison (VSP), a men's facility located at 21633 Avenue 24, Chowchilla, California. The MCGJ was invited to attend a staff meeting to hear the daily briefing.

The VSP men's facility functions as a Level Two facility, which the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) defines as a facility with open dormitories with a secure perimeter that may include armed coverage. Although VSP does have inmates who are sentenced to life. More serious offenders are typically transferred to a higher-level facility.

The VSP facility's design capacity was 1,980. On December 6, 2022, Governor Newsom allowed the capacity to be increased by 137.5 percent, making 2,722 the adjusted capacity. At the time of the MCGJ visit, there were 3,244 inmates, which exceeded the new capacity limits.

The MCGJ was specifically interested in the success rate attributed to Proposition 57. Under Proposition 57, CDCR incentivizes inmates to take responsibility for their rehabilitation with credit-earning opportunities for sustained good behavior and participation in programs and activities. Proposition 57 also moved up parole consideration of non-violent offenders who have served the minimum number of years required of the sentence for their primary offense. Those inmates have demonstrated that their release would not pose an undue risk to the community. These changes, specifically the incentives for rehabilitation achievements, good behavior, and education, are intended to improve inmate behavior and to create a safer environment for inmates

Exterior and Gardens:

Valley State Prison has a building that houses a library and a chapel. The chapel hosts daily religious and spiritual services for multiple denominations. The perimeter grounds near the chapel are beautifully landscaped with grass, boulders, various flowers, shrubs, and benches and is known as the Prayer Garden. This landscaping was made possible by a directed donation to VSP, and is maintained by the inmates. The MCGJ observed bees swarming the flowers. This could result in an allergic reaction. A compact raised vegetable garden planted and maintained by the inmates was also observed.

There are two baseball fields, separated by fencing and pathways. Exercise equipment is situated on one side of each of the fields. The use of the fields are scheduled by cell block letters for a morning shift and an afternoon shift in order to manage the inmate population to have exercise time outdoors.

Inmate Housing:

The facility has several different housing units, many of which provide specialized services and accommodations for inmates. A restrictive housing unit replaced Administrative Segregation (AdSeg). One building is able to be used for medical quarantine and isolation when needed. Some units are dedicated for Veterans, and another for the Enhanced Outpatient Program, providing additional self-help and therapeutic programs. VSP is creating a re-entry unit designed for inmates preparing for release. This is available for inmates who are eligible for parole within two years and are accepted into the unit following an interview with VSP staff. These inmates have access to additional amenities and incentives, but also have more responsibilities within the unit. Inmates are responsible for cooking and cleaning within the unit giving the unit a more community-based atmosphere. The goal is to provide inmates with the skills necessary to be successful members of society upon their release.

The MCGJ inspected the unit that houses the dog training program. The dogs are rescued from shelters or donated, paired with an inmate, and trained as service, support, and therapy dogs. VSP staff members are also able to bring their dogs to receive the training. The dogs remain in the housing unit 24/7 and are cared for and trained by the inmates. The inmates do a remarkable job training these animals. The positive relationships and trust between the inmates and their dogs were evident. This program provides “a second chance” for both inmates and the dogs who get adopted after they finish their training.

Medical/Mental Health

Valley State Prison includes a hospital staffed by an on-site doctor, registered nurses, licensed vocational nurses, lab technicians, and pharmacist. The unit appeared clean and tidy. At the time of the tour, there were 20 social workers, 22 psychologists, 20 recreational therapists, seven psychiatrists, and several practicum interns. It was reported that VSP has approximately 1,000 inmates with disabilities, which is one-third of the overall population. Inmates with disabilities or impairments were observed wearing vests, indicating the need for additional support.

Kitchen

The main kitchen was clean, but it was not in use during the visit, as the tour took place after the meals had been prepared for the day. There are separate areas within the kitchen dedicated to special dietary needs, including individual storage areas, preparation tables, and cooking ovens. Inmates with food allergies receive guidance on foods to avoid. Inmates are provided with a hot breakfast, a cold-bagged lunch, and a hot dinner. VSP is doing a pilot program with California Healthy Harvest where heart-healthy items are featured monthly on the menu. VSP kitchen staff reported that feeding the inmate population costs approximately \$4.31 per person per day. There is a unit that includes *dead man's trays*. If an inmate dies, their tray is saved and inspected to be sure the cause of death was not food related.

Education and Vocational Program

Twenty-one full-time teachers are employed by VSP to provide academic classes ranging from pre-literacy all the way through GED. There are also higher learning opportunities offered through various online college programs. Inmates receive academic assessments before meeting with an advisor and are placed on appropriate waiting lists.

Many vocational programs and certifications are available to the inmates. Current programs are available for masonry, cosmetology, computer and related technologies (CTR), welding, and small engine repair. The Prison Industry Authority (PIA) provides training in the Optical program to make prescription eyeglasses for Medi-Cal recipients and inmates throughout California. Inmates accepted into the programs, which range from 6-18 months, are able to obtain certifications and are eligible to apply for a state license upon completion.

In addition to the education and vocational programs, various other programs are available to inmates which benefit the local community. The Valley State Prison Bike Refurbishing Program refurbishes and donates over 300 bikes annually, including adaptive bikes for physical disabilities. The Braille Transcription Program trains transcribers, and transcripts are donated to local schools and agencies. Other programs, such as *Defy*, *CEO of my Life Program*, which provide business development training, and teach skills that can be used upon release. Several restorative justice and trauma-informed therapeutic groups are also available to those who choose to participate. Upon returning to the community, the inmates have been given marketable skills for employment, which is the intent of Proposition 57.

The Youth Offender Program Mission is an educational mentor program aimed towards young offenders between the ages of 18-25. The mentors provide positive guidance and access to institutional resources at a critical time in their lives when they are the most receptive to change. By providing positive mentoring, educational, vocational, and self-help resources, youth offenders have a greater chance of success upon release, which reduces the recidivism rate. There were 530 participants in the program, 229 mentors, 175 youth enrolled in the program. Since the inception of the program, 352 youth have graduated. When interviewed, a youth offender stated the mentor support was based upon mutual respect and encouragement. The mentors interviewed discussed trying to change the culture for the younger inmates and wished they had someone to assist them when they were younger. The mentors assist youth offenders with classroom work and emotional support.

Visitation Areas

There are two types of visitation areas; one area is for daytime visits and an additional area for overnight Family visitation.

The walls inside the daytime visitation room have murals featuring colorful sea animals that were painted by the inmates. There are also children's play areas. A separate outdoor picnic area that contains barbecues can be used for inmates who wish to purchase food for their visitors.

The facility has four two-bedroom units for overnight *Family* visitation, which can be reserved for up to three nights. Each unit has a fenced outdoor area that features green rubber

mulch that looks like grass. Inmates can request overnight visits every 90 days and must be approved by the staff. A visitation room for up to six-hour visits is available on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays.

Findings:

F1. The MCGJ finds that VSP has overpopulated the facility and is far exceeding the designed capacity limits.

F2. The MCGJ finds that VSP provides a multi-faceted environment with the goal of rehabilitation and the reduction of recidivism.

Recommendations:

R1. The MCGJ recommends that VSP meet the State-authorized capacity by October 1, 2024.

R2. The MCGJ recommends that VSP continue to develop the multi-faceted environment for the purpose of rehabilitation and the reduction of recidivism.

Required Responses: Pursuant to Penal Code Sections 933 and 933.05, the Madera County Grand Jury requests responses from the following governing body within 90 days:

Valley State Prison Warden
21633 Avenue 24
Chowchilla, California 93610

Governor Gavin Newsom
1021 O Street, Suite 9000
Sacramento, CA 95841

Invited Responses: Pursuant to Penal Code Sections 933 and 933.05, the Madera County Grand Jury requests responses as follows:

From the following governing body within 60 days:

Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC)
2590 Venture Oaks Way, Suite 200
Sacramento, CA. 95833

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury. The California State Legislature has stated that it intends the provisions of Penal Code Section 929 prohibiting disclosure of witness identities to encourage full candor in testimony in Grand Jury investigations by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those who participate in any Civil Grand Jury investigation.
