

South Tahoe jail's success a testament to staff's work

By Kathryn Reed

Finding fault – that's usually what a grand jury does.

It's getting more difficult to do that at the South Lake Tahoe jail.

Every year the two jails in El Dorado County are scrutinized by the grand jury – it's the law. Commendations are extremely unusual. The South Lake Tahoe jail received its third commendation this year.



Randy Peshon

Sheriff Fred Kollar says the praise in this summer's report "says a lot about (jail commander and Lt.) Randy (Peshon) and his staff."

Just based on the people who spend the night, trouble has walked through the door. It's how the staff deals with the inmates that contribute to the 158-bed facility functioning so well.

"This group I'm working with in the jail is the best ever. They are very excited and very positive," Peshon said. He has been jail commander for eight years.

The report says, "The 2009-2010 El Dorado County Grand Jury

commends the South lake Tahoe Jail administration and staff for their dedication in providing a safe and secure custodial environment. The number and variety of available programs, especially the Culinary Arts program, have a proven record of success.”

Other entities receiving commendations from the grand jury this year include:

- The registrar of voters for plans to save the county money and actions to secure accuracy of all ballots cast.
- The Probation Department and Office of Education for advocacy and rehabilitation programs for at-risk youth.
- The CAO and staff for consolidation of administrative service functions in county government.
- Growlersburg Conservation Camp leadership for various items.

Besides the culinary program, which serves 700 meals a day, the grand jury noted the church services, drug and alcohol counseling, English as a second language, GED program, Health Education and Recovery Through Self-Responsibility, Mental Health Court, and Women’s Health.

The report found four items the jail needs to address – most of which Kollar and Peshon said have been taken care or are in the process of being fixed. With the building originally built in 1971 and an addition coming 20 years later, the flat roof the grand jury pointed out as contributing to leaks is not going to change any time soon.

Originally, the facility was the sheriff’s department substation.

In the 2010-11 county budget are the dollars to upgrade the security and surveillance cameras, as well as improve and expand the number of recording cameras.

The department is working on getting the cracks in the cinderblock fixed. Kollar said it was built with 4-inch blocks when it was supposed to be 8-inch.

What the inmates get

Budget issues are always looming over Peshon's head. One category he has little control over is medical expenses. About \$1 million a year is spent on inmate health care – just in the Tahoe jail.

“Inmates generally have more health care issues than the general population,” Peshon said. “People who go through the system have more issues. They age faster.”

It's not unusual for a 50-year-old inmate to have the health problems a 70-year-old on the outside would have.

Peshon said with a significant number of inmates older than 34, he has noticed a rise in health issues.

People coming in often experience withdrawals from their drug of choice in a matter of hours. A nurse is on duty 24 hours a day to handle whatever comes up.

A general practitioner comes in once a week, as does a psychologist. Psychiatric care is via videoconference.

A trek to Placerville is required for dental care.

Serious medical conditions mean a trip to the hospital.

Exercise is encouraged, with an area downstairs for those who can't walk upstairs, and a larger area on the second floor for the more able bodied.

Taking part in one of the programs is also encouraged.



The commercial kitchen at the South Lake Tahoe jail. Photos/Kathryn Reed

“You are dealing with people who may not want your help, but need your help,” Peshon said of the inmates.

Most of the programs are segregated by gender, but a few are co-ed. The thinking is that with so many inmates having relationship issues that getting them to interact with the other gender before getting out will make their release easier.

Inmates are not allowed to call staff by first names. It’s rank and last name.

“There is always something going on 24 hours a day,” Peshon said. “If it suddenly goes quiet, you are going to have problems.”

Various murals are painted on the walls inside – all done by inmates. The one in the kitchen has the culinary program’s theme written out – “Jail house catering, it’s so good it’s a crime.”

A system within the system exists if inmates misbehave. Steve Sherman is responsible for making sure the punishment fits the crime. If an inmate is caught writing on the wall, his likely sentence is painting.

Once formally sentenced, inmates can stay in county jail for a year. Some have stayed longer while awaiting trial. Ulysses Roberson, who was convicted earlier this year in the murder of his 4-year-old son, spent six years in this jail before his trial began.

Working inside the jail

“Literally, it’s like running a little town,” Peshon said of the jail.

When he got into law enforcement he never envisioned he would learn so much about food and nutrition, as well as laundry.

Under his direction the culinary program is receiving awards, allowing inmates to have a skill when they get out and provides qualified employees for local businesses.

Keeping the peace is a full-time job for Joe Ruelas. As a gang expert, he figures out who plays nice together and when housing changes need to be made.

“It’s a balancing act,” Ruelas said. He is part of the regional intelligence meetings that include California and Nevada law enforcement, parole and probation officers.

It’s the Norteños and Sureños that dominate the turf on the South Shore, with the Sureños the larger group. The latest gang of concern is the Juggalos out of the Modesto, Ruelas said.

No one in the jail wears a gun. This is for everyone’s safety. But tear gas, grenade launchers and gear are just outside the housing units in case officers need to quell a major disturbance.

Often it is the jail employees who come up with ways to make their work area function better. Pads were added to the booking area to prevent injuries because this had been an area where fights would often break out.

Computerization has made it so booking went from a four-hour event to 45 minutes.

A box phone is in the holding cell because years ago an inmate hanged himself with the cord from the old phone. Another suicide preventive feature is sprinkler heads designed so an inmate can't tie off on it.

"We exceed the training for suicide prevention," Peshon said.

Even when there was a fire a year ago in the jail, the staff still managed to lay eyes on every inmate each hour – a state requirement.



The second-floor control room.

On the second floor Sherman doesn't stand still. A slew of monitors are in front of him. Out the vast windows in this circular work area are the various pods of inmates. The floor has glass so he can see some of what is going on below him.

The jail is at minimum staffing with 24 sworn officers and six sergeants, along with Peshon who is a lieutenant.

Clerks, nurses, sheriff's technicians and detention aides make up the whole workforce.

"What keeps it running smoothly is everyone watches out for everyone else," Peshon said. "We keep our humor up. We run it as a family."