

FILED IN OPEN COURT
This 29 day of January 2021
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Grand Jury Inspection and Report
of the
Walton County Jail and Detention Center
Clerk, Walton Superior Court

Karen O. David

January 2021

On January 15, 2021, 3 members of the Grand Jury met with Sheriff Joe Chapman at the Walton County Jail and Detention Center. Accompanying the Sheriff was Major Wade Harris, Jail Commander. We met in the Sheriff's Office at the jail. The Sheriff and Major spoke with us for over an hour on a variety of topics related to the jail, their position on law enforcement and the numerous challenges they face. They provided answers to our questions, gave us much of the history of the jail and shared stories from their experience running the jail.

After speaking with the Sheriff, he appears to have a strong sense of commitment toward "We the People" and his role as defined under the Constitution. He gave several examples of being very tough on crime, but showed wisdom in knowing that it's also necessary to treat people fairly and with understanding. He understands that, while there are hardened criminals who require a heavy hand, there are also those who have simply made mistakes in life. Although his hands seem tied politically, the Sheriff is also cognizant of the fact that certain laws create a revolving door where people become unnecessarily trapped within the system, causing much of the overcrowding (for example, rearrests for minor "technical" parole violations, largely due to low income restraints).

Prior to the meeting, the Grand Jury compiled a rather large list of questions to gain an objective perspective of the operation of the jail. Major Wade Harris stated they spent several days answering the questions in writing. Capt. Scott Pecore, Jail Operations and Investigations, also assisted in providing answers to the questions. The questions appeared to have been answered honestly, and no discrepancies were found upon the actual jail inspection.

It's a rather large facility with 463 inmates (at the time of the inspection). Unfortunately, the jail was built to house only 376 inmates. Walking through the jail it's apparent the building is largely outdated and in need of much repair. The locking mechanisms seemed cumbersome, there was paint chipping everywhere and many of the ceiling tiles were damaged. Within the cell blocks, much of the visibility within the guard towers was poor. Certain areas of the jail are poorly designed, making them more dangerous from a security standpoint. The Sheriff stated that several things have broken within the jail, and the parts are no longer available. While they're managing to keep things running relatively well, the condition of the jail itself is extremely poor. At this point, the overall consensus is that it would be better to rebuild than to attempt to repair it further. The Grand Jury Committee objectively agrees with this assessment.

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Upon admission, inmates are booked, searched and fingerprinted. Inmate records are kept in both paper and digital format. Their possessions are cataloged and sealed in air tight bags. Before entering the general population, inmates are required to shower and are issued a uniform. The inmates are taken to cells based on their classification (gender, type of crime(s), risk to themselves or others, mental state, disability, etc.).

Inmates are provided a diet which appears adequate, and religious requirements are accounted for within reason. The diet includes two hot meals a day and cold cuts for lunch. There are processes in

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place which allow inmates to obtain special food items as long as they maintain good behavior. There is at least 1 nurse available 24-7, averaging 2 nurses during the day and 1 at night. Doctors are either on-call or by appointment and dentists are available by appointment. Counseling is available to inmates through a third party.

The jail leadership has developed solid plans in the event of riots, fire and inmate escape. During normal operations, the response time for an officer requiring assistance usually happens within seconds, even with their limited staff. Face-to-face inmate checks are conducted at intervals of every 60 minutes for general population, 30 minutes for special inmates and 15 minutes for those at risk of suicide. The cells are checked for contraband on a regular basis. Sanitation issues are also checked for on a regular basis. Each cell is documented and logged within their computer system, which gets verified by supervisors for compliance.

Certain inmates demonstrating good behavior are given privileges to work in the laundry and kitchen areas, for example. Very low level offenders, and some inmates, may be eligible for the ankle monitoring program (typically those with chronic health conditions, pregnancy, etc.). To be eligible, things such as an inmate's criminal history, current charges and other factors are examined before making the determination. The GPS tracking is monitored by a third party, and if any problems occur an officer is dispatched to verify the offender's status.

Weight lifting and exercise equipment is provided within the jail to help officers maintain good physical fitness, for altercations which inevitably can and do occur. Officers also have on-going training throughout the year. Officers are constantly dealing with disruptive behaviors from the inmates, but they are monitored closely and dealt with swiftly. Inmates are permitted to move freely outside their cells at appointed times. Officers in the guard towers watch constantly for any unusual behavior such as large congregations of inmates within an area, an inmate acting strangely, etc. There are numerous fights, but a relatively low number of severe inmate-to-inmate attacks due to their efforts in maintaining order.

Within the cell blocks, in 2019, there was 1 aggravated battery (broken jaw), 1 sexual assault, and 7 shanks located by officers (no stabbings). In 2020, there was 1 aggravated battery (broken eye socket) and 6 shanks recovered by officers (no stabbings). Severe attacks are charged criminally, but less severe violations are also dealt with strongly. These include solitary confinement and/or loss of privileges, recreation, store calls and visitation. All violations go through a disciplinary process hearing along with appeals and sanctions if required.

When questioned by the Grand Jury Committee, the number one complaint was the low number of staff on shift. Detention Officers working the cell blocks are potentially in danger at all times. An officer conducting inmate checks is vastly outnumbered if an altercation were to occur. Officers have only a limited amount of defensive tactics included in their training. It was observed during the Grand Jury tour that a single officer is responsible for conducting checks while surrounded by dozens of inmates. There is 1 officer in the guard tower monitoring, but they're unable to leave their post. The population of the jail has continued to grow, even beyond the capacity of the jail itself, yet in the past 5 years the staff levels have remained the same. From the lay person's perspective, having an additional officer(s) to rotate between cell blocks as the checks are conducted would greatly add to the safety of the officers (for example, having someone there with clear visibility to watch their back, create a perimeter, and use defensive measures immediately if necessary).

Another legitimate complaint is regarding the equipment provided to the Detention Officers, which looks to be inadequate. Officers dealing with inmates are issued latex gloves, a radio, duty belts with pepper spray and an older taser. Officers do not have any form of body armor or protection. Simply replacing their duty belts with load-bearing vests would help to reduce the hip and lower-back pain on their 12 hour shifts. Stab vests and newer tasers would also help ensure their safety. The Grand Jury Committee did not find this to be an unreasonable request, and the costs seem minimal for their health and safety.

Inmates have the ability to file "grievances" against officers. If a grievance is found to be credible, by the Grievance Officer, the complaint is sent to the Jail Investigators. Some inmates will file frivolous complaints against Detention Officers, but each is still taken seriously and investigated individually. After reviewing all the available evidence, including video, the complaint will be designated as either justified or non-justified. Non-justified actions are immediately acted upon and may include verbal counseling, suspension with or without pay, termination or criminal charges. All actions taken are placed in the officer's personnel file and reviews are scheduled weekly, monthly or quarterly based upon the severity of the action. Officer misconduct is not tolerated at the Walton County Jail. In 2019, after an investigation conducted internally, an officer was charged and later sentenced to one year in jail.

The officers and other staff appeared very professional and highly focused on their duties. It's apparent that Capt. Pecore is well respected by those under him, and that goes for Major Harris and Sheriff Chapman as well. The staff is encouraged to share their ideas for helping to improve the efficiency and safety of the jail. Working together, they've come up with numerous improvements such as a more efficient way of feeding lunch, which allowed inmates to use the remainder of their time on recreation. To enhance safety, they've developed processes for obtaining behavioral intel on inmates and sharing that intel between shifts. Additionally, due to the high turnover rate, officers often participate in the process of reviewing and recommending new applicants.

Without question, the greatest assets within the jail are its employees. In the opinion of the Grand Jury Committee, the break-down of the average pay for the various officers is far too low, given the high risk, the 12 hour shifts, and even the cost of living. The poor compensation weighs heavy on the high turnover rate, which in turn causes a flow of less experienced officers coming in. This has the potential of putting themselves, other officers, and the inmates in greater danger.

This concludes the Grand Jury Committee's inspection of the Walton County Jail.

Sincerely,
Matthew A. Healy

Committee Members:

Mechelle Webb Engemann
Kevin D. Wiggle
Cynthia Guy
Matthew A. Healy

To whom it may concern:

On Monday December 28, 2020, a group of grand jurors paid a visit to the Walton County Tax Commissioner's office. While we were there we spoke to Mr. Boyd, the Walton County Tax Commissioner about the duties and responsibilities of their office. The County Board of Commissioners appoints the board of tax assessors for fixed terms. He explained that their roles consist of collecting property taxes for personal and business, ad valorem taxes on motor vehicles and mobile homes, heavy equipment, timber and public utilities. In addition to these responsibilities, they must also establish fair market value of properties in Walton County. It is important for them to assess property value correctly so that the county can provide its citizens with any services that are needed.

The DOAA (Department of Audits and Accounts) will do a statistical test to determine if values are compliant. If they are found to be non-compliant it is a \$5/parcel fine which could be estimated at \$210,000 for Walton County. In addition to these fines, they can also repossess grant money from Georgia and issue a complete re-estimation to bring values back to compliance. Mr. Boyd on occasion must work with the public to settle disputes for any property issues. At the time of our visit Mr. Boyd had no concerns. From our observations they seemed to be working efficiently.

Information sited from www.waltoncountyga.gov

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