

**A REPORT BY
THE 2011-2012 CONTRA COSTA COUNTY GRAND JURY**

725 Court Street
Martinez, California 94553

Report 1210

**Voluntary Inmate Labor – A Lost
Opportunity
Cooperation and Common Sense**

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LLOYD D. BELL
GRAND JURY FOREPERSON

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JOHN T. LAETTNER
JUDGE OF THE SUPERIOR COURT

Contact: Lloyd Bell
Foreperson
925-957-5638

Contra Costa County Grand Jury Report 1210

Voluntary Inmate Labor – A Lost Opportunity Cooperation and Common Sense

**TO: Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors
Contra Costa County Human Resources
Contra Costa County Sheriff**

SUMMARY

The Contra Costa County (County) jails are in poor shape and in need of essential upkeep such as painting and refurbishing. General maintenance is not getting done due to a shortage of manpower in the General Services Department (General Services) and the diminishing financial resources of County agencies. The Sheriff's Office has attempted to mitigate these issues by expanding the existing use of voluntary inmate labor in kitchens and laundry facilities to also include painting and grounds keeping. Union grievances have been filed, which have stopped the practice. Though precedents exist in other counties for such use of voluntary inmate labor, the County has not pursued a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to permit such use in this County.

The union and the County need to begin discussions that lead to the use of voluntary inmate labor to perform other routine maintenance tasks at confinement facilities during this economic downturn.

BACKGROUND

General Services supports the other County departments by performing repair and maintenance services. County departments "pay" for these services by allocating a portion of their budget to General Services, funding the General Services budget. Unfortunately, due to the economic downturn, County departmental budgets have been reduced. This has, in turn, reduced the amount departments allocate to General Services for routine maintenance of buildings and grounds. This allocation reduction has in turn forced General Services to downsize their staff, resulting in reduced manpower allocations to provide services to financially-strapped departments. Financially-strapped departments are forced to forego some repair and maintenance services due to reduced financial resources, and General Services having insufficient personnel with which to pursue its mission of providing services to the County. This situation has resulted in fundamental services such as painting and grounds maintenance falling behind, creating an unkempt appearance at the jails.

This deteriorating maintenance situation is particularly noticeable at the County detention

facilities which operate 24 hours per day, seven days per week. Currently at these facilities, inmates voluntarily provide their services in the kitchen and laundry facilities, learning new skills and saving the County money. However, there have been instances when the Sheriff's Office used voluntary inmate labor to paint or provide grounds maintenance. After union grievances were filed, the work effectively stopped.

There is precedent for the use of voluntary inmate labor to perform certain tasks in the jails. Use of volunteers in the kitchen and laundry facilities in Contra Costa County has been an established practice for some time. Further, at the medium security facility in Solano County, inmates volunteer their labor for mowing, painting, cleaning offices, gardening, and cleaning kennels at the animal shelter. Even at their high security facility, inmates work in the kitchen and laundry and perform minor clean-up around the exterior of the facility. This arrangement is made possible by an MOU between the bargaining unit and the Solano County Sheriff's Office outlining what their General Services employees will do and what their inmates will do.

A more expansive program is used at the East Mesa Detention Facility (EMDF) in San Diego. Laundry and food production for EMDF and other facilities is coordinated through the Inmate Industries Program. This program also provides opportunities for inmates to volunteer to learn print shop skills, janitorial services, construction trades and computer graphics skills.

The benefits of using inmates to perform voluntary maintenance at the jails include:

- A better maintained facility
- Basic work habits for the inmates
- Incentives for good behavior for the inmates

Although there have been frequent discussions on expanding the use of voluntary inmate labor between the County and the union representing General Service employees, there has been no resolution of this situation to date.

FINDINGS

1. Funding shortfalls are contributing to the deterioration of the detention facilities.
2. Voluntary inmate labor could be used for minor maintenance and repair activities.
3. Current practice validates expanding the use of voluntary inmate labor for routine duties.

RECOMMENDATION

1. The County should meet with the union representing General Service employees regarding expanding the use of voluntary inmate labor to perform minor maintenance and repairs at the detention facilities.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Findings 1 through 3

Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors

Contra Costa County Human Resources

Contra Costa County Sheriff

Recommendation 1

Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors

Contra Costa County Human Resources

Contra Costa County Sheriff