



# Sierra Conservation Center and Baseline Camp Report

Mandatory Inspection Report  
June 30, 2020



Facility Entrance Signs

Photo: Luann Hopkins



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## Mandatory Inspection Report

### Summary

Sierra Conservation Center (SCC) was established in 1965 and as of February 12, 2020 houses 4,368 inmates. SCC provides three levels of confinement: minimum, medium, and sensitive need/high security. The facility provides many opportunities for inmates to acquire education, work skills that can be used upon release, mental health services, recreational programs and a wide variety of other programs designed to fulfill the rehabilitation goals of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

In addition to the main campus, there is the Baseline Conservation Camp, providing firefighting crew to assist in fighting wildfires and fire prevention around the state.

The California Department of Public Health issued its biennial Environmental Health Survey Report October 2018. Because of the detailed and comprehensive nature of the Environmental Health Survey Report, the 2019-2020 Grand Jury did not consider this inspection an investigation, but rather its statutory duty to visit the local prison facilities.

### Glossary

|      |                                                                                    |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ASU  | Administrative Segregation Unit (for inmates needing highest level of supervision) |
| BCC  | Baseline Conservation Camp                                                         |
| CDCR | California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation                            |
| CDPH | California Department of Public Health                                             |
| EHSR | Environmental Health Survey Report                                                 |
| GED  | General Education Development                                                      |
| PUPP | Prisoners Uniting People with Puppies                                              |
| SCC  | Sierra Conservation Center                                                         |

## **Background**

Pursuant to California Penal Code Section 919 (b), “the grand jury shall inquire into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county”. Members of the 2019-2020 Tuolumne County Grand Jury inspected Sierra Conservation Center and Baseline Conservation Camp (BCC) on October 16, 2019.

## **Methodology**

Members of the 2019-2020 Grand Jury conducted a site visit on October 16, 2019, to both Sierra Conservation Center and Baseline Conservation Camp. The Public Information Officer (PIO) provided a walking tour of the Sierra Conservation Center. During the site visit, Jurors made inquiries of SCC and BCC staff and inmates. Jurors made personal observations. Additionally, information was derived from the California Department of Public Health Survey Report, and the SCC Welcome Manual.

## **Discussion**

Sierra Conservation Center is located on 420 acres in Jamestown. As of March 11, 2020, there are 4,283 inmates, though the facility is only designed to house 3,836 inmates. SCC employs about 500 custody staff, 300 non-custody and 200 medical staff with an additional 10 correctional officers at the BCC site.

The tour took six Jurors through Facility A (minimum or lower risk inmates) Facility B (lower risk inmates) and Facility C (for higher-risk inmates, as well as an administrative segregation unit). When Grand Jurors posed questions, all staff were willing to answer them. In a conversation with correctional officers, the Grand Jury learned that some officers participate in charitable events outside of the prison. For instance, several officers run in fundraising marathons.

### **Medical Facilities**

The medical facility at SCC encompasses the basic medical needs of inmates. Services address the dental, vision, mental and physical health needs of inmates. If inmates require additional or more extensive care, they are transported to appropriate hospitals, usually Adventist Health located approximately 15 miles away in the city of Sonora.

While the Grand Jurors were touring the medical section of the prison, an alarm sounded. Jurors were concerned about what it indicated and where the problem was located. However, several minutes elapsed between the sounding of the alarm and the ability of the correctional officers to physically locate its origin. Depending on the cause of the alarm, a delayed response time could endanger medical staff, officers, and inmates.

According to the Public Information Officer (PIO), each staff member wears a Personal Alarm Device (PAD) which, when activated, causes a blue light to flash. This blue light guides staff where to respond but does not pinpoint the exact location of the incident which results in delayed response time.

There are also four other types of alarms: voice, radio, whistle, and phone off the hook. Grand Jurors were unable to hear radio transmissions made by staff as they worked to clear the alarm. The PIO informed us that it was, in fact, an accidental push by a medical staff member and was a common occurrence.

Global positioning system (GPS) utilizes a cellular networking system, satellite monitoring and tracking and computer software to provide officer, staff, or inmate tracking. A transmitter electronically connected to a portable tracking device which communicates position to a surveillance data center is currently in use to provide offender tracking. Active GPS tracking would allow officers to quickly locate an alarm and determine location through mapping software.

The officers determined what was causing the alarm as well as its location. At no time did jurors feel in any danger. The staff was reassuring and handled the situation professionally.

### **Facility C**

Facility C is the section of the prison that houses inmates requiring a higher level of security as well as the ASU. This part of the prison is surrounded by an electrified fence which discharges a lethal shock to anyone who touches it.

During the tour of Facility C, Jurors were shown the vocational building housing the facilities in which inmates make visibility vests and other safety garments. These are purchased by Caltrans and other public entities through the Prison Industry Authority.

There are also building and carpentry skills training where the inmates construct, deconstruct and rebuild small-scale houses. All the vocational activities at the SCC are designed to decrease recidivism, increase prison safety, and enhance public safety by providing offenders productive work and training opportunities.

### **PUPP Program**

In the tour of Facility B, Jurors were able to observe inmates who were participating in the program Prisoners Uniting People and Puppies (PUPP). This program uses specially selected inmates paired with various breeds of dogs. Upon entry, dogs may have obedience issues, but by the time they have spent 12 weeks with their two assigned inmates, they are ready for adoption. A professional trainer comes in once a week to provide guidance to the inmates in their training of the dogs. Dogs that are available for adoption can be found at the Friends of the Animal Community website at <https://www.foac.us/pupp-program/>. Not all dogs shown will have gone through the PUPP program.



Photo courtesy of FOAC

## **Baseline Conservation Camp**

Grand Jurors were also given a tour of the Baseline Conservation Camp and were provided with lunch prior to the tour. The Sergeant in charge also provided a walking tour of the housing units, the grounds, laundry facility, and recreational room. At the time of the BCC tour almost all inmates were off-site so there was no opportunity to talk with inmates.

During the tour, it was noted that some of the cement steps going from the main office to various housing units did not appear to have adequate striping to delineate the top and bottom steps.

Jurors noted that access to the eyewash station was blocked by laundry supplies.

It was also observed that one or more brown electrical outlets next to a sink in Housing Unit 1 did not appear to have a Ground Fault Circuit Interrupter (GFCI). GFCI is commonly used in wet or adverse environments to prevent electrical shock.

Assignment to the BCC is considered one of the best in terms of inmate flexibility; it is sometimes referred to as a “prison without walls” since there are no fences and inmates are allowed more freedom to move from place to place. Since this camp is designed to provide inmates with useful firefighting training as well as a less restrictive environment, escaping, fighting, or other undesirable activities are rare.

## **Findings**

- F1.** Staff is sometimes unable to pinpoint the location of sounding alarms, leading to a delay in distinguishing between a false alarm and a genuine one. False alarms are hazardous to the safety of staff, visitors, and inmates. The alerting system for detecting problems in the medical unit does not immediately identify the location of the alarm.
- F2.** The Grand Jury observed potential non-GFCI outlets at Baseline Conservation Camp, which creates a safety hazard.
- F3.** Inhibited access to the eyewash station at Baseline Conservation Camp was observed by the Grand Jury.
- F4.** At Baseline Conservation Camp markings of the cement steps appear to be inconsistent and do not provide adequate safety to inmates, correctional officers, and visitors.
- F5.** The PUPP program is successful both for inmates and the public. Inmates gain a sense of connection with the dogs and get an opportunity to experience success on a personal level. The public gains access to dogs that are suited for adoption.
- F6.** Participation of correctional officers in community fundraising activities provides an opportunity for the public to observe Sierra Conservation Center personnel contributing to the wellbeing of the community.

## Recommendations

- R1.** The Grand Jury recommends review of the procedures for notifying visitors inside secure areas about possible alarms and procedures which will generally be followed. Consider updating the alarm system with technology capable of pinpointing where the problem is occurring. (F1)
- R2.** The Grand Jury recommends GFCI outlets be installed immediately in all potentially wet areas. (F2)
- R3.** The Grand Jury recommends that access to the eyewash station at Baseline Conservation Camp be kept clear at all times, in case of an accident requiring its use. (F3)
- R4.** All cement steps and walkways at Baseline Conservation Camp should be inspected immediately and properly marked to prevent any tripping hazard. (F4)

## Request for Responses

The following responses are required, pursuant to California Penal Code §933 and §933.05, no later than 90 days after the Grand Jury submits a final report on the operations of any public agency subject to the reviewing authority, the governing body of the public agency shall comment to the presiding judge of the superior court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the governing body and every elected or appointed county official or agency head for which the Grand Jury has jurisdiction shall comment within 60 days to the presiding judge of the superior court.

- ▶ The Sierra Conservation Center Warden is requested to respond to R1.
- ▶ The Baseline Conservation Center Commander is requested to respond to R2, R3, and R4.

## Bibliography

Board of State & Community Corrections 7th Annual Report of Implementation of Corrections Partnerships Plans, July 2019

California Department of Public Health Environmental Health Safety Report, August 2018

Sierra Conservation Center Welcome Manual, 2015

## Disclaimer

This report was issued by the 2019-2020 Tuolumne County Grand Jury except for one Juror who is employed by and one Juror whose family member is employed by the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. These Grand Jurors were excluded from all parts of the investigation, including interviews, deliberations, and the writing and approval of this report.

*Reports issued by the grand jury do not identify the individuals who have been interviewed. Penal Code §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 grand jury.*