

Audit Highlights



Highlights of Legislative Auditor report on the Department of Corrections, Inmate Programs, Grievances, and Access to Health Care, issued on September 24, 2008. Report # LA08-19.

Background

The Department of Corrections is responsible for the supervision, custody, treatment, care, security, and discipline of all offenders sentenced to imprisonment in the State. The Director supervises the administration of all Department institutions and facilities and must take proper measures to protect the health and safety of the public, staff, and offenders. The Director also establishes regulations and administers the Department under the direction of the Board of State Prison Commissioners. The Board is comprised of the Governor, Secretary of State, and Attorney General.

During fiscal year 2007 more than \$54 million was spent on correctional programs, adult education, and health care. Of this amount, about \$40 million was spent on health care, \$8 million on adult education, and \$6 million on correctional programs. Adult education is provided by school district staff.

Purpose of Audit

The purpose of this audit was to evaluate the effectiveness and availability of the Department's correctional programs, and to determine if the State offers education and vocational programs that provide inmates with employment opportunities. We also assessed the Department's inmate grievance process, determined the feasibility of creating a citizens advisory committee to monitor grievances, and evaluated inmate access to health care. Our audit focused on these programs and functions from July 2006 through December 2007, and through April 2008 for certain issues.

Audit Recommendations

This report contains 31 recommendations to improve inmate programs, the grievance process, and access to health care. Sixteen recommendations address improving correctional programs including: prioritizing class placements, measuring program effectiveness, strengthening program oversight, and better managing program classes and class materials. Eight recommendations address education including: improving vocational education programs, and strengthening planning and reporting of education activities. We also made three recommendations to ensure inmate grievances are responded to timely and adequately documented. Finally, four recommendations address improvements to inmate access to health care.

The Department accepted the 31 recommendations.

Status of Recommendations

The Department's 60-day plan for corrective action is due on December 23, 2008. In addition, the six-month report on the status of audit recommendations is due on June 23, 2009.

Inmate Programs, Grievances, and Access to Health Care

Department of Corrections

Results in Brief

The Nevada Department of Corrections can more effectively manage its correctional programs. The Department offers a variety of cognitive behavioral and educational program classes, similar to those provided in other states. These programs address anger management, behavioral changes, substance abuse, life skills, and other issues. Although the Department uses a variety of assessments to identify inmate needs, these assessments are not always used to prioritize which inmates are placed in program classes. Moreover, the Department has not developed processes to determine the effectiveness of its programs. Therefore, it is unclear which programs are best at preparing inmates to successfully reenter society.

Although Nevada provides inmates with educational opportunities similar to those found in other states, more emphasis is needed on vocational programs. The Department, working with the Department of Education, should evaluate vocational programs to determine if these programs provide inmates with employment opportunities. The two departments should also work together to ensure the curriculum for vocational classes is consistent statewide.

The Department has developed an inmate grievance process which is similar to other states. However, better oversight is needed to ensure grievances are addressed within established timeframes, files contain required signatures, and department responses are adequately documented. We identified two states with a grievance oversight committee. Although these committees have different powers and duties, both states reported their committee had a positive impact on the grievance process.

The Department has established a system to ensure all inmates have access to health care. This includes methods to request health care, handle medical emergencies, and treat inmates with chronic illnesses and special needs. These methods are comparable to states surveyed and national standards. However, improvements can be made in some areas. These include ensuring vital equipment is available and in working order, co-payment information is adequately communicated, requests for health care are reviewed timely, and emergency response times are adequately documented.

Principal Findings

The Department lacks a consistent process for prioritizing which inmates are placed in program classes. Therefore, the institutions use different methods to determine which inmates to place in program classes. Administrative Regulation 801.02 indicates inmates should be placed in classes based on their criminogenic (criminal behavior) needs identified from assessments. However, staff do not always follow these requirements when placing inmates in classes.

The Department has not performed periodic assessments of its programs. NRS 209.389(1) requires the Board of Prison Commissioners to establish by regulation programs of general education, vocational education and training, and other rehabilitation for offenders. NRS 209.389(3) requires that regulations must provide for an assessment of these programs at least every 3 years by qualified persons, professional groups or trade associations.

Nevada offers more program classes than other states. Information provided by surveyed states revealed these states typically offer less than 10 different classes. Nevada currently offers 35 different classes. Several Nevada classes address similar topics and others are only taught at a few facilities. Department staff commented Nevada has too many classes on the same topic and the number could be reduced.

Required assessments of vocational programs have not been performed. NRS 209.389(3) requires an assessment of vocational education programs by qualified individuals or organizations at least every 3 years. Additionally, Administrative Regulation 850.02(1)(2) requires vocational programs provide inmates with training and skills to obtain employment after release, and to the extent possible reflect community employment needs. Since required assessments have not been performed, it is unclear if current vocational classes provide inmates with the best opportunities for employment.

Inmates at the Florence McClure Women's Correctional Center (FMWCC) and Southern Nevada Correctional Center (SNCC) did not receive on-site dental treatment for more than 6 months because these institutions were without a dental chair. FMWCC went without a dental chair from October 2006 until April 2007, and SNCC from September 2006 until April 2007. The lack of adequate equipment caused delays in dental treatment and created unnecessary security risks when inmates were transported to other facilities for treatment.