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Prisons

Partners with the Community

By JOHN R. SCHAFFER and DOUGLAS ZISER

NCCF photo by Dick Fernandez, FBI

In general, the public views correctional facilities as a necessary evil. Even so, most citizens do not want one built in their communities. Prisons can, however, create a solid economic base in a community, while creating a suitable environment for those on both sides of the wall.

The North County Correctional Facility (NCCF), located north of Los Angeles in Sangus, California, serves as an example of a prison that provides a more livable approach for all those involved with the facility. The philosophy underlying the design and construction of the facility radically departs from the

traditional way of viewing prisons. Overall, the NCCF was not built as a place where offenders are punished, but rather as a place where they serve their punishment.

The NCCF officially began operation on March 1, 1990, but years of careful planning led to this juncture. Stringent State and Federal regulations, as well as the community's high expectations, governed the design team's efforts. As a result, the NCCF stands as an aesthetically pleasing, technologically advanced correctional facility that has been accepted as part of the surrounding community.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Perhaps the most important consideration in living in partnership with a prison is creating and strengthening community relations. Prior to the opening of the NCCF, a transition team established a liaison program to assist with the assimilation of the NCCF into the community. The transition team members addressed community associations and social clubs in order to educate citizens about the operation of the prison. Community members were also invited to take guided tours of the NCCF to inspect the modern security measures employed to keep the community safe.

Another goal of the transition team was to dispel the rumors and myths regarding correctional facilities. Once citizens learned all the facts regarding the NCCF, they no longer feared having a correctional facility in their community. But the acceptance by the community rests, in large part, with the design and technological advancements incorporated into the NCCF.



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DESIGN OF THE FACILITY

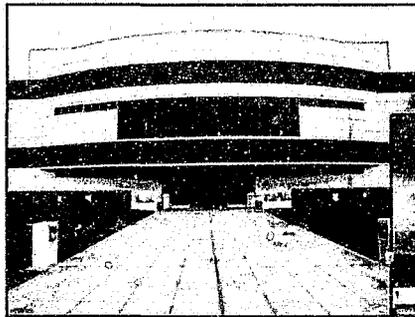
The \$138 million NCCF houses up to 2,900 inmates and is part of the Los Angeles County Correctional System (LACCS), one of the largest in the Nation with 11 separate facilities. Staffed and operated by deputies from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and civilian support personnel, the NCCF operates various rehabilitation industries, to include a bakery, print shop, and sewing shop. The items produced in these shops are used to meet the needs of both the LACCS and the county itself.

A unique feature of the NCCF is that it was designed in part by a team of administrators and correctional officers and not exclusively by architects and contractors who possess limited knowledge regarding the ongoing operations of a correctional facility. From the outset, the design team set out to create a community-friendly facility that employed new technology and provided functional workspace.

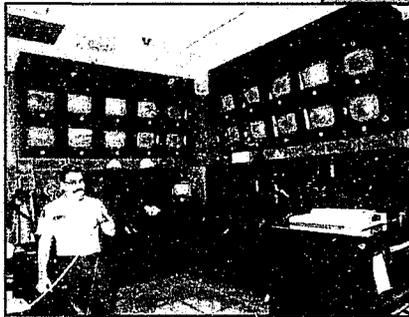
New Technology

To begin, the design team visited as many correctional facilities in the United States as possible. These fact-finding trips provided invaluable information regarding new technology and procedures implemented by other institutions. Since the NCCF design team consisted of administrators as well as correctional officers, each met with their counterparts when visiting other institutions. This allowed the design team to learn how specific systems worked—or sometimes did not work—before these systems became part of the NCCF.

For example, the design team visited a newly constructed correctional facility that employed technologically advanced pneumatic locking door devices. After a short period of time, facility personnel discovered the pneumatic locks could be easily defeated by placing a strip of cardboard between the locking piston and the door frame. The failure of this locking device



Interior and exterior views of the NCCF.



NCCF photos by Dick Fernandez, FBI

allowed inmates free access to restricted areas of the prison. This required the correctional facility to spend thousands of dollars replacing this system with a more conventional locking device.

Community Friendly

The second objective of the NCCF design team involved creating a facility that would blend into the natural surroundings of the community. Specifically, the design team sought an alternative to dual chainlink fences topped with multiple rows of wire and guard towers. To create a more attractive setting, high brick walls conceal rows of wire and guard towers from the public's view. Consequently, to the community and the outside world, the NCCF more closely resembles a college campus than a correctional facility.

The landscape consists of large, well-maintained areas of grass, flowers, and trees. The earth-tone facade of the NCCF and surrounding walls blend into the local environment. The NCCF also maintains a full-time painting support crew whose responsibilities include keeping the facility freshly painted and free from graffiti.

Functional Workspace

Third, to create a functionally efficient workspace within the NCCF, the design team interviewed the deputies and civilian support personnel who would work there. Using accounts of their experiences at other correctional facilities, the design team eliminated many of the problem areas in the construction plans. By doing this, NCCF designers accommodated workers' needs and allowed employees to make a

positive contribution to the design of the facility. For the most part, much of what is incorporated into the facility's interior is the result of employee input.

THE FACILITY'S INTERIOR

Unlike a typical linear cell block construction, inmates are housed in circular-designed dormitories. Each dormitory accommodates up to 48 inmates, and 4 dormitories constitute a unit. At the center of each unit stands a staff station equipped with a computer. This enables the staff station officer to access basic information regarding an inmate's release date, holds placed on the inmate by other law enforcement agencies, court dates, and other pertinent information.

The close interaction between the staff station officer and the inmates creates a more personal relationship, thus lessening the probability of miscommunication. In addition, personal interaction between the staff officers and the inmates, combined with direct visual control of the dormitories, creates a sense of openness that helps to ensure a violence-free atmosphere.

The circular design of the dormitories also allows the NCCF staff station officers to see directly into all sections of each dormitory through widely spaced, diamond-shaped bars. These bars serve to lessen eye strain for the staff officers and provides inmates a more open environment.

Each dormitory is equipped with a shower system that permits inmates to shower at their convenience. In addition, the dormitories also have televisions and an area with stainless steel tables and stools

that can be used for recreational purposes or for serving meals to the inmates in the event of a lockdown.

For mealtimes, the food is brought from the kitchen, and the entire prison population is fed in their respective dormitories, thus saving 1 1/2 hours for each meal service. This procedure also cuts down on corridor travel, lowers potential for violence to and from the cafeteria, and dramatically reduces overtime pay for kitchen personnel. The total cost savings is approximately \$240,000 per month.

Designers selected neutral shades of brown, tan, and beige for the interior of the facility. These soft colors provide a calming psychological effect on inmates and employees alike. Moreover, a series of 5-inch-wide windows stretching from floor to ceiling allow natural light to flood the long corridors. The narrow windows, which can be safely fitted with less expensive glass, reduce the possibility of escape through these openings.

To enhance visual control, corrections administrators chose dark blue jumpsuits for the inmates' uniforms. The dark blue provides the best contrast against the varied brown-tone backdrop of the dormitories. This visual enhancement reduces the potential for unauthorized activities.

ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY

The NCCF employs the latest advanced technology. The facility is equipped with a computer-driven security and fire safety system operated from a centrally located control room. The control room operator can control every door within the facility, operate security

cameras, and activate the fire safety system. Each door and security camera within the complex has its own unique set of operating instructions stored within the computer. When a security officer activates a particular door or camera, the computer monitor displays the corresponding operating instructions. This is also true in the event of fire or other emergencies.

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...the most important consideration in living in partnership with a prison is creating and strengthening community relations.

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Within the control room, computer keyboards are conspicuously absent. The design team intentionally gave the control room the feel of a hard-wire system by installing heavy duty buttons and switches instead of keyboards.

This system effectively integrates high technology with equipment familiar to the operator, thus reducing computer anxiety. When these buttons and switches are pushed or turned, they execute a computer command similar to typing a command on a standard computer keyboard. This system eliminates the need for computer training and allows an inexperienced officer to learn control room procedures in a relatively short period of time.

Due to the unique design features of the NCCF, it became necessary for the contractors to use novel techniques to meet construction requirements. For example, the NCCF was the first institution of its kind to use self-locking doors. The door lock automatically recycles itself to the locked position when the door is closed. This locking system, which was designed specifically for the NCCF, is now widely used in similar institutions throughout the country.

Additionally, cement floors in the NCCF were sealed with a low maintenance compound that actually shines itself with normal foot traffic. The installation of these chemically treated floors saves approximately \$75,000 annually in maintenance costs.

Maintenance costs are cut even further because the NCCF has been designated a non-smoking facility. The ban on smoking saves approximately \$50,000 in paint, smoke detector maintenance, and air filters for the heating and air conditioning units.

CONCLUSION

The NCCF was designed and built using the team concept. Team members consisted of individuals representing all aspects of the correctional system.

More important, the NCCF stands as a model correctional facility for those faced with the prospect of having a correctional facility built in their community. This program has shown how a community and a prison can live in harmony on either side of the high brick walls. ♦