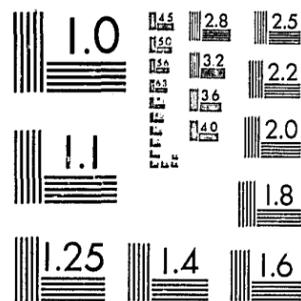


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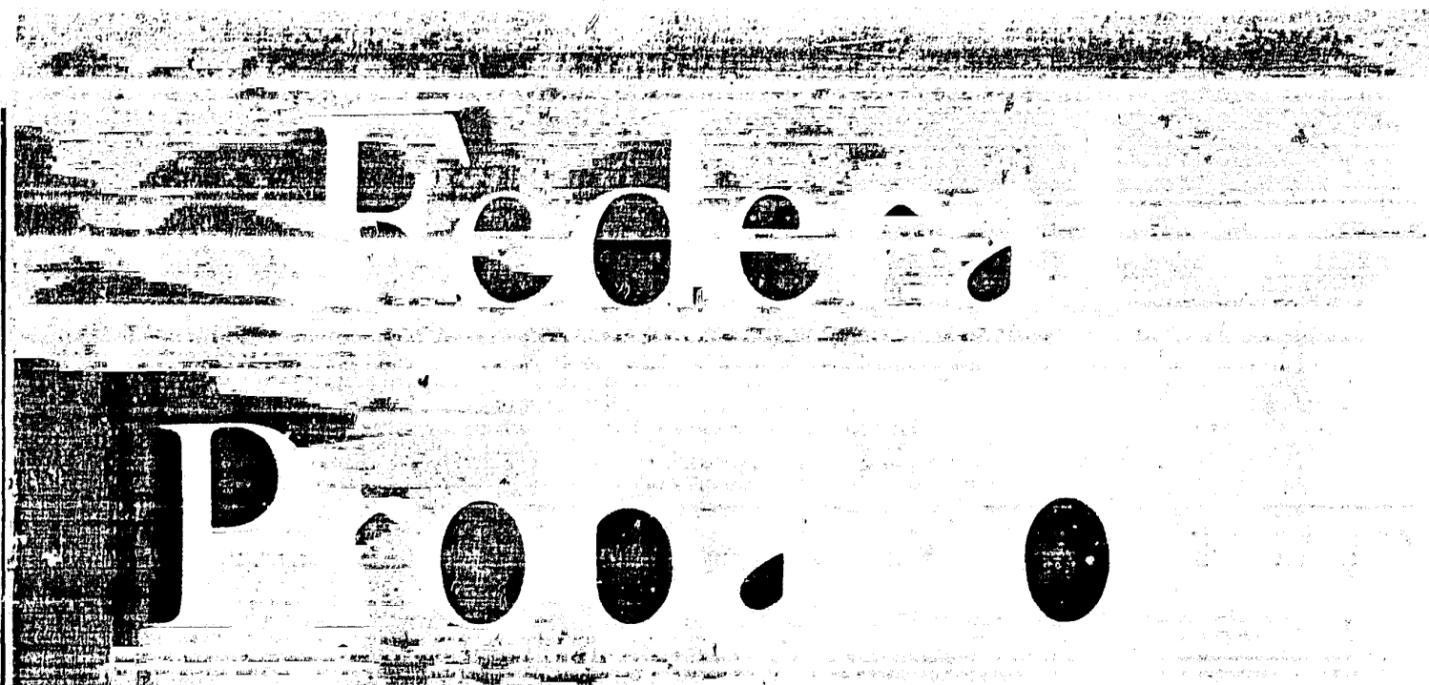
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Unit Management in a Penitentiary: A Practical Experience*

BY W. ALAN SMITH, PH.D. AND C.E. FENTON**

THE BUREAU OF PRISONS is continually attempting to develop more effective ways of managing institutions. Since the late 1960's a major direction in these efforts has been toward a concept which has become known as Unit Management. The development and operationalizing of this concept has increasingly permeated the management systems of the Bureau. So extensive has been this commitment that by mid-1976, 26 of 31 institutions were utilizing the system for total institution management.

Unit Management, as a strategy for institution operations and programming, has been described by Levinson and Gerard (1973). It was conceptualized and developed as a means of more efficient program delivery to inmate populations, better utilizing staff resources, and enhancing the institutional environment. The system calls for the subdivision of an institutional population into groups of approximately 100 inmates who reside in common living areas. Attached to each group or unit is a staff consisting of a unit manager, a psychologist, one or two case managers, two or three correctional counselors as well as the custodial complement for their living area. The unit manager is a department head with responsibility for the overall operations, programming and functioning of the unit. Each staff member is responsible for utilizing his or her expertise within the program of the unit, and all staff are based within the living area.

There are several benefits to such a system. First, more staff are placed in close contact with a manageable number of inmates, thus enhancing staff-inmate communications, better delivery of program packages, and quicker problem identification and solution. Second, the division of inmate populations into small groups helps to insure that

each man is not "forgotten," forestalling the de-personalization and anonymity which tends to exist in larger groups. In addition, the system encourages problem identification and solution at the lowest possible level within the organization. Further advantages are derived from the staff's knowledge of and concern about the inmates and their problems.

As with any system, there are disadvantages which must be dealt with. The primary problem which arises is that the roles of managers change. Any unit management system tends to restructure traditional lines of authority. Bringing divergent disciplines together under the unit manager in order to coordinate and thus enhance their effectiveness results in almost total restructuring of roles at the middle management level. Chiefs of case management find that all case managers and secretaries now report to a unit manager. Chief psychologists find their subordinates are assigned to a unit. Firm administrative commitment to the system and support for both unit manager and department heads appears to ameliorate many of these difficulties. The institutional administration must have the confidence, strength and flexibility to initiate and support the changes required.

The first attempt to utilize a system of Unit Management occurred at the National Training School in Washington, D.C. The Robert F. Kennedy Youth Center first used the system for total institution program management in 1968. From these beginnings, Unit Management spread throughout the Federal Prison System until in mid-1976, the only institutions which had not fully implemented this system were the six penitentiaries.

In the penitentiaries, problems of physical plant, population size, and limited staffing had blocked development of Unit Management. In addition, since the system was developed primarily as a mechanism for program delivery, the penitentiaries had given it a lower priority than those of custody, control and containment. Plans had been developed but were thwarted by financial, physical plant, staff, and conceptual limitations.

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The breakthrough for moving Unit Management into the penitentiaries came as a result of a series of incidents at, and surrounding, the United States Penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. Inmate violence, emphasized by the press had become a source of concern of the public, the Congress, the Judiciary, and the Bureau of Prisons. As a result, a Board of Inquiry was ordered by the Bureau in June of 1976. A major recommendation of this Board was that the penitentiary should "establish a complete unit management system" (Bureau of Prisons 1976). This recommendation was accepted by the Bureau's executive staff, who, in support of the plan, allocated 20 staff positions for its implementation at Lewisburg. It then fell to the administration and staff at Lewisburg to develop the most effective plan for unit management in this setting.

A Brief Background

As indicated earlier, Unit Management originally was developed primarily as a program delivery system. It was expected that as inmates became more involved in individualized programming and staff involvement and availability became pervasive, greater control would result. This has, apparently, been the case. Reports of fewer serious incidents, better inmate morale, and lower tension come from institutions utilizing the system.

In a penitentiary, however, the priorities are somewhat different. The older, more sophisticated, more potentially violent population demands that conditions of safety, security and control rank as first priority. This was particularly true at Lewisburg where incidents of violence and terrorism had precipitated a crisis in management. Thus, it was necessary to develop a system which would first meet the criteria of establishing a climate of safety, control, and discipline. Although secondary in importance, it was expected that, as these primary objectives were accomplished increased programming, higher inmate morale and reduced tension would accrue. In order to understand how these goals were attacked, it was necessary to understand Lewisburg, its inmates and physical plant.

Physical Plant.—Built in the early 1930's as a WPA project, the institution has an operating capacity of 1,400 inmates. It was the first of the "modern" penitentiaries in the Federal Prison System.

The institution is enclosed within a free-stand-

ing wall with eight manned gun towers. There is an Industrial Complex, Mechanical Services Building, Vocational Training area, recreation yard and main building. At the center of the main structure is the "Red Top" or hub of the institution. The Chapel and dining rooms open onto this central plaza from the north. Long corridors extend east and west from the "Red Top" with the 10 living areas off these corridors. The living areas are three stories each with 4 cell blocks, 2 open dormitories, 1 dormitory partitioned into cubicles, and 3 with multiple or single rooms. Thus, a full range of housing must be utilized for the Lewisburg population. Solving the problem of assignment to these housing areas was one of the critical tasks of the Unit Management system.

The Inmates.—As is the case with many institutions, Lewisburg has experienced significant population shifts over the past several years. Increased use of probation, community alternatives to imprisonment and increased militancy have combined with burgeoning inmate populations to produce marked changes in the inmates who are incarcerated at the institution.

Inmates at Lewisburg are relatively young, with an average age of 33, mostly black (64 percent) and having fairly long sentences (10 year average). They are sophisticated with regard to the criminal justice system. More than 50 percent have 3 or more prior arrests; and 41 percent have been arrested more than 9 times. In terms of prior commitments, 47 percent have been incarcerated 2 or more times. Further, the vast majority of inmates come from the large urban areas of the northeastern seaboard. There appears to be a definite trend toward the exacerbation of this profile toward an even younger, more sophisticated, volatile, immature and violence-prone population.

Developing Philosophy.—Given the inmate population and physical facility described above, it was necessary for the administration of the institution to develop a philosophy and operational plan for the installation of a Unit Management system at Lewisburg. The concepts of such a system had been developed to facilitate program delivery. These now had to be adapted to emphasize the control and security so necessary in the penitentiary setting. Further, the plan had to account for the physical limits of the institution and meet or exceed criteria for the human dignity, safety and program needs of the inmates.

It has long been recognized that the two dormi-

tories, E and F, were a major problem within the institution. Among staff and inmates these areas had become known as "the jungle." The reason was simple, population pressure had caused expansion of the number of inmates to these living areas to nearly 330. Limited staffing had reduced custodial control to the point where the presence of an officer in these living areas was a rarity. Concomitant with this, a rather insidious tradition had developed. As each offender entered the institution, he was evaluated by the staff to determine his housing needs. Two classes of inmates were designated for cell housing: (1) those who were extremely vicious, escape prone or in other ways presented a clear danger to the security of the institution and (2) those who were unable to survive in a dormitory. Over a period of years, this second group grew and grew until a preponderance of the cells were occupied by them. Of course, those remaining in the dormitories were more and more the aggressive, predatory and violence prone inmates. Thus, the cell housing became a device for protecting inmates from predators rather than the reserve.

In light of this, it was the first task of the planners for unit management to develop a system by which the secure housing areas were occupied by those inmates needing control. The open areas must be then reserved for inmates who could live in an open dormitory setting. It was felt that such a change of approach to living areas would go far toward inmate accountability, safety and control. Of course, such a differential housing placement was viewed as concomitant with the more traditional goals of Unit Management described previously.

A similar problem had occurred in the establishment of an institutional plan at the Federal Correctional Institution at Oxford, Wisconsin. In that institution, the proposed population of long term, relatively youthful offenders in a physically large institution with minimal internal security required a system of living unit assignment which fostered separation of predatory and nonpredatory inmates. The system devised for Oxford utilized a typology devised for juveniles by Dr. Herbert C. Quay (1971) and modified for use with adults. Basically, Quay's system combines current, observed, behavioral data with background information to produce standardized scores on five behavioral dimensions. These were named: (1) Situational-Normal, (2) Neurotic-Anxious, (3) Inadequate-Immature, (4) Manipulative, and

(5) Aggressive-Psychopathic. Each inmate arriving at Oxford was evaluated using the system and placed into one of three units.

There were however, problems in replicating the system at Lewisburg. First, a penitentiary has little control over its incoming clientele resulting in the distinct possibility that too many inmates would be assigned to one or more of the units thus forcing the use of living areas by inmates unsuited for them. Second, Oxford was a new institution and the appropriate unit designation was done as each inmate arrived. Finally, it was deemed important to establish independent, voluntary units for that portion of the population who could demonstrate their need and motivation for special programs.

The system at Oxford was successful. During the first two and a half years of operation there were no escapes, or attempted escapes, one minor assault of inmate on staff (no injuries) and one inmate on inmate assault. An evaluation of the environment of the institution (Karacki and Prather, 1976) utilizing the Correctional Institution Environment Scales showed that both staff and inmates generally viewed the operations of the institution as at or above the national norms for the scales.

In view of these indices, it was decided to utilize the Oxford model in designing a system for Lewisburg. By modifications it was hoped that the problems of limiting unit size, "unitizing" the present population and voluntary units could be resolved.

The Model.—It was decided that the Lewisburg population could be divided into seven units. These would be (1) Drug Abuse Program (DAP), (2) Admission and Orientation, (3) two units for inmates working in Industries and (4) three "management" units. DAP and the two Industries units would be voluntary, consisting of inmates who were interested in the programs involved and motivated to take advantage of them. These three "volunteer" units were assigned to "preferred" quarters, Industries generally on the third floor of each living area, and DAP in a newly renovated area ("I" block). DAP would have a capacity of 80 men. The two Industries units would total approximately 470 inmates (the number employed by the Federal Prison Industries). Thus, it was expected that these volunteer units would provide an incentive for inmates to achieve. The DAP Units would provide enriched program opportunities coupled with new quarters.

The Industries units would provide "preferred" quarters and living with work associates, in addition to monetary and job satisfaction usually associated with Prison Industries.

In order to appropriately designate inmates to the three management units, it was decided to strengthen the Admission and Orientation Unit. As at Oxford, a fairly regimented, 2 week schedule was developed. At the end of the period the behavioral and background checklists used in Quay's system were to be completed and appropriate designations made. To combat the problem of equalizing the size of each unit's population a flexible assignment scheme was developed. The intent of the designation process, it will be remembered, was to separate elements of the institution population which were most likely to have conflicts and assign inmates to housing commensurate with institutional needs for control and security. The experience at Oxford demonstrated that combining inmates who received high scores in the categories of Manipulative and Aggressive-Psychopathic, and in the categories of Anxious-Neurotic and Inadequate-Dependent would result in reasonably congenial units which contributed to the mission of the institution. Further, those who had elevated scores in the Situational-Normal category and those for whom no scale was significantly elevated could live together in relative harmony. This rather more heterogeneous group was formed into the third management unit. The primary emphasis in the scheme was to insure that those inmates whose scores were suggestive of extreme adjustments in the Aggressive-Psychopathic and Manipulative categories be kept apart from those with high Inadequate-Dependent and Neurotic-Anxious indices.

During the planning phase of the system, a random sample of 10 percent of the population was selected. Checklists were completed by case managers and detail supervisors and an estimate was obtained with regard to the size of each prospective unit. Based upon this estimate we were able to establish the initial cutting scores which would produce balanced units in terms of size. It was expected that, over time, adjustments in these scores would be necessary in order to maintain this balance. It was also anticipated that such changes would not markedly affect the composition of each unit. The primary focus was to separate the extreme ends of the behavioral continuum.

A model of total inmate management was thus developed. Inmates would be initially put in the

Admission and Orientation program during which a unit designation would be made. After an inmate moved to his assigned unit from A&O, he would have two choices: either (1) remain in that unit or (2) volunteer for either the DAP program or Industries. If he remained in the unit he and his team would agree upon a job assignment and such programs as he might need. If he decided, either immediately or later on, to volunteer for a different unit assignment he would apply to that program. He would then eventually be selected to move into the unit depending on the availability of space, his motivation and the needs of the receiving unit. Any inmate in one of the volunteer units who decides he no longer wishes to participate in the unit activities is returned to the unit to which he was originally designated.

Planning.—Such a model had been relatively simple to implement at the new facility at Oxford. Faced with the existing physical facility, staff and population at Lewisburg, the planners faced a challenge of different nature. Unit Management as originally conceived was designed to associate a number of staff with a relatively small group of about 100 inmates. From the outset, it was obvious that, at a penitentiary, these parameters must be tested. Limiting unit size to 100 inmates would require a minimum of 14 unit managers. By expanding the size of the units to 200+ inmates, only seven unit managers would be required thus, increasing the number of staff available for direct services to inmates.

Taking this option, it was then necessary to assign quarters to each of the units commensurate with the inmates who would be assigned to them. Several considerations were a part of these decisions. The voluntary units, DAP and Industries, should have housing which was attractive to the population. One management unit needed all cell housing while the other two needed both cell and dorm housing. The Admission and Orientation Unit needed semi-secure housing with an office, lecture room and housing for about 50 inmates.

Prior to the mandate for the establishment of the Unit Management system at Lewisburg a project was begun to renovate "I" cellhouse. At the beginning of this project, the staff of the DAP Unit had had considerable input into the design as the plan was to utilize the quarters for that program. It thus seemed logical to use "I" block for the DAP Unit. Its multiple rooms, planned office space, day rooms and relative isolation from the institutional traffic pattern seemed to be in

concert with the program emphasis of the unit. The first two floors of "I" block were designed for a capacity of 80 inmates which was well in line with the optimum size for DAP.

Industries were the next concern. With an industrial payroll of 470 inmates it was here that the greatest problems were presented. Traditionally, at Lewisburg, the top floors of the housing units were viewed as very desirable quarters by the inmate population. Assigning all inmates employed by Industries on those upper floors would have the added advantage that since they all worked during the day, less supervision would be necessary in those areas. The third floors would be off the main daytime traffic patterns and could be secured for a major part of the day. This would significantly increase the amount of custodial supervision available to other areas. A further benefit of such an arrangement was the fact that, in the event of an attempted work strike, it would be difficult to organize the inmates when they were in so many different living areas. This last consideration was also the greatest obstacle to such an arrangement. Conceptually, a functional unit had been defined as a group of inmates living in common quarters. The proposed arrangement for the Industries Units seriously violated this tenet. A careful review of the alternatives and weighing of the positive and negative aspects, however, led the planners to adopt the proposal. To offset the less desirable elements of this solution, it was decided to put the staff of each of these units in the Industries Complex rather than the quarters. This, it was felt, would allow the staff to incorporate into the inmate activities during the day and thus we could foster the concept of truly "industrial" units.

This left the three management units and A&O unit. The management units had been named using standard nonsense syllables of the form consonant-vowel consonant. The unit for persons with Aggressive-Psychopathic and Manipulative characteristics was called MAB, that for those classified Neurotic-Anxious and Inadequate-Dependent was designated FAL, those in the Situational-Normal category, SAN. From the previous analysis of the problems at Lewisburg and the experience at Oxford, it was obvious that two considerations should be paramount in housing decisions for these units. First inmates in the MAB unit would need the closer controls offered by cell housing. Second, inmates from the MAB and FAL units should be discouraged from intermingling

as much as possible. In addition, it was felt that A&O should be removed from the possible influence of the MAB inmates. Therefore, it was decided that the MAB unit would consist of all cell housing (A, B and D cellblocks), while FAR would occupy "C" cellblock and the first floor of "E" dormitory. All those designations were of course exclusive of the third floors which were occupied by the inmates in Industries units. A&O would, along with the SAN and DAP units be located in the west corridor where less contact would be expected.

Again, although the management unit living quarters were in closer proximity to each other than those in Industries, there was considerable separation. This was unavoidable in light of previous decision about the number of units and their size.

Staff.—Concomitant with the decisions about the unit locations, it was necessary to finalize the staff complements for each.

The DAP Unit, as an established program entity, had its complement of a unit manager, case manager, two counselors and a secretary. While the addition of 30 to their inmate population would impose additional burdens, it was felt that these would not be excessive.

For the remaining units, the problem of assigning staff fell easily into place. The size of the two Industries and three management units and consequent requirements for case management services dictated an even balance of case managers between these units. Thus two case managers were assigned each unit. This gave each case manager a load of between 120 and 150 cases. The management units were each assigned three counselors while Industries received 2 counselors each. Two counselors were assigned to the A&O Unit to direct its operations and functions under the supervision of a coordinator. No case manager was assigned to A&O, and those services were provided by rotating these duties among the case managers assigned to Industries. Each of the management and Industries units was assigned a secretary.

This, then, completed the assigned staff complements for each of the units. Although not at the level which was originally proposed to support such endeavors, the staffing pattern seemed appropriate to the local requirements. Although it would be preferable to have a more enriched staff/inmate ratio, it was recognized that any additional infusion of staff into the unit manage-

ment system would proportionately reduce effectiveness of other operations.

Implementation.—Having laid out the framework for the unit management system for Lewisburg, all that remained was to implement these plans. It is comparatively easy to formulate grand schemes designed to accomplish lofty objectives. Faced with a 45-year-old physical plant, a staff which had been under considerable pressure, and nearly 1,500 inmates, the time had come to confront the issues directly.

The first step in the process was to inform both staff and inmates what plans were being made. This was an ongoing, all out effort which encompassed both staff and inmate newspapers; scheduled, 4-hour question and answer sessions with all staff; and extensive informal discussions with inmates. This critical step began almost immediately with the arrival of the new administrative staff and continued throughout the process of implementation. Every effort was made to keep both staff and inmates informed of the planning which was progressing and to obtain their input into the plans. As in any such endeavor, there was some concern that ill-founded rumors would create excessive resistance to the changes produced by the new system. Fortunately, this all out effort at disseminating information forestalled, for the most part, undue anxiety and tension among both staff and inmates.

The next phase which posed serious problems, involved the actual placement of the existing population into the correct unit living areas. After a great deal of discussion, it was decided that the best way to proceed should be in sequential fashion, making relatively few moves at any one time. Also, it was critical that the inmates be kept fully abreast of the movement planning, and be allowed all possible latitude in making voluntary moves. The DAP inmates, whose quarters were nearing completion, would be first to move followed by Industries and finally the management units. This sequence seemed logical in several ways. First, the DAP inmates had been anticipating the move for over a year. They were looking forward to going from a dormitory to the multiple rooms which had been renovated. Industries inmates would not, in general, be moving from one type of quarters to another as most of these moves would be from floor to floor within the same housing area. Movement for the management units, which would be the most potentially disruptive, would thus follow all the other moves.

By sequencing moves over a period of time and progressing in a relatively slow but consistent fashion it was expected that no serious resistance would be encountered. This expectation proved correct.

To begin the process, all inmates working in the Prison Industries were moved to the top floors by exchange with others living there. Random assignment produced the expectation, which was borne out, that a third of these inmates would be correctly located. Thus, the implementation of this step involved the movement of about 620 inmates. The change was accomplished over a period of about 2 weeks, and caused little disruption. The smoothness of the move was attributed to the massive effort to keep everyone informed about the process and the intensive involvement of all unit staff. In addition, the great predominance of changes were floor-to-floor within the same quarters, and few inmates were required to move from one type of quarters to another.

Concomitant with the implementation of the Industries Units, the A&O program was restructured. The schedule of activities was revised such that all orientation activities could be accomplished in a 2-week period, and two counselors were assigned to coordinate the program. Built into this scheme was the Quay classification system for unit designations, described earlier. Thus, each inmate arriving at the institution was evaluated and assigned to the appropriate unit team and associated living quarters.

Finally, it was necessary to decide on the issue of how to redesignate the remaining 900 inmates who were not assigned to the Industries. Three options appeared to be open. First, natural attrition could be allowed to take over, and after a period of time, all inmates would have come through the A&O Unit and be properly designated. Second, each inmate could be classified using the ratings of detail supervisors or counselors and case managers and moves could be made by vacating a set of quarters and then selectively filling each living unit. Finally, designations could be made as above, but instead of vacating quarters, housing moves could be made according to unit assignments on an exchange basis.

The latter option was selected for a number of reasons. After all of the turmoil, the staff and inmates were "ready" to accept rather disruptive measures as long as they could see some progress. Also, the size of the population precluded vacating quarters. Finally, attrition was

too slow a process considering the problems of dormitories discussed earlier. Although there were admittedly some problems with the selected option, no other alternative seemed more reasonable. The major problems identified were: (1) classifying the remaining 800 inmates to the units, (2) physically making the moves to the appropriate units, and (3) maintaining open channels of communications to forestall problems. With an awareness of these concerns and potential difficulties, the process began.

For each inmate checklists (Quay 1971) were completed by his case manager and Counselor or work detail supervisor to evaluate his background and present behavior. These were scored on the basis of the five behavioral dimensions and a unit designation was made. After notifying each inmate of his unit designation and team, a period of 2 or 3 weeks elapsed. During this time, inmates were encouraged to voluntarily move to quarters within their unit. If, at the end of that time, they had not moved, they were assigned to new quarters. In this way 25 to 30 inmates were moved each day. The process took just over 2 months, and during that time, over 1,200 housing changes were made. As a result of the intensive communications, availability of staff, and other preparations, only two inmates resisted the process.

The movement of the inmates to the proper quarters completed the preparations for Unit Management; Unit Teams could then begin the process of getting to know their inmates, planning programs, and developing the rapport necessary to a smooth running operation. This final planning and implementation process took just under 4 months, and was accomplished without significant resistance from either staff or inmates.

Discussion

Many modifications were made in the operations of the institution during the period of time when the Unit Management system was being instaffed. As a result, hard data which reflect the effectiveness of the Unit Management system and are uncontaminated by these other elements are difficult if not impossible to assemble. Further, it would be presumptuous to extrapolate too far from data gathered over a short term in such an environment.

There are however, some indications that there has been a turnaround at Lewisburg. In the 26 months prior to the installation, there were eight homicides in the prison. Since the installment of Unit Management, there has been one. Visitors, including judges, congressmen, correctional experts, educationalists and others from outside the Bureau of Prisons have commented on the reduction in tension within the population. The staff of the penitentiary now supports the system, and there appears to be a closer harmony between departments. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the inmates have expressed feelings which reflect greater measures of safety, control and a tension-free environment.

Reflecting on the changes which have occurred at the penitentiary, there appears to be a number of concepts which deserve underscoring. The fact of changing Lewisburg from being a dangerous, tense, uncontrolled institution to one characterized by relative harmony, safety, and staff control was not accomplished easily. The tasks of planning, organizing and implementing the Unit Management system at Lewisburg was aided immensely by the climatic events culminating in the visit by the Board of Inquiry. The message was clearly given at that time that "changes" would be made, and staff and inmates alike were thus prepared for the massive changes which followed. As planning and implementation proceeded these processes were enhanced by keeping the staff and inmates informed of the process. Both groups were kept fully abreast of the plans as they were developing and were thus incorporated into the process. Finally, as the implementation proceeded there were a number of critical points passed, such as the movement of inmates between quarters, where "courage of convictions" forced the issue and enabled the process to proceed.

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