

CALIFORNIA CONSERVATION CAMP WASHINGTON RIDGE

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

California Penal Code Section 919(b) requires “The grand jury shall inquire into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county.” The Nevada County Grand Jury defines public prisons as any adult or juvenile correction or detention facility within the county. The Conservation Camp at Washington Ridge is a California Youth Authority facility within the county of Nevada.

BACKGROUND

The California Youth Authority began its Youth Conservation Program in 1945. California Youth Authority (CYA) personnel in partnership with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) staff the facility. CYA is responsible for the custody, supervision, and treatment of wards. CDF plans and supervises work projects performed by the wards. Ward camp crews, each led by a CDF captain, provide a variety of conservation services to state and local government agencies. Crews typically work in state and county parks; perform stream clearance, wildland fire prevention tasks, and restoration work. During the fire season, ward crews are involved in wildland fire suppression throughout the State of California. Camp crews are also assigned to flood control activities. The major emphasis of a camp program is on employability skills, with a strong emphasis on developing good work habits. Wards also receive leadership training within their crew structure.

PROCEDURE FOLLOWED

The Grand Jury inspected Washington Ridge Conservation Camp. The Grand Jury interviewed the management and staff responsible for the operations and oversight of the facility. The Grand Jury reviewed various documents requested from this facility.

FINDINGS

1. The Washington Ridge Conservation Camp began operations in 1961. Although some of the buildings are over 40 years old, the entire camp was found to be clean, well maintained, and in good condition.
2. Wards housed at Washington Ridge Camp are between the ages of 18 and 25. Wards stay at the camp from four months to two years, with the average being 10 months.

3. Washington Ridge Camp currently has two fully trained fire fighting crews, which assist the CDF and other area fire departments during the fire season.
4. When not involved with fire fighting, Washington Ridge camp ward crews, under the supervision of a CDF captain, work providing low cost labor while learning skills. Examples of groups and agencies that they have worked with are the Nevada County Fairgrounds, Senior Center, Master Gardeners, and Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park.
5. There has been a decrease in the number of juveniles sent to CYA during the past few years. One of the reasons for the decline is due to judges referring fewer youths in favor of more localized and less restrictive methods of rehabilitation for "non-violent" offenders.
6. The number of wards in the camp ranged from 76 in October 2003 to 41 in January 2004. In June 2004, there were 46 wards. The Grand Jury was told that a statewide commission to identify more candidates for the camp has been established which will provide more assistance in fire fighting and community service.
7. The educational facilities and methods of instruction were reviewed and found to comply with state and county standards. Wards are required to attend classes with the objective of obtaining a high school diploma or a GED.
8. The camp provides appropriate recreational facilities and learning opportunities for the wards that offer them both mental and physical outlets.
9. Events in mid-2003 caused the relationship between CDF and CYA to become strained. The Grand Jury was informed that both agencies are now expending energy to improve cooperation to provide better services.

CONCLUSIONS

The Washington Ridge Conservation Camp is a benefit to both the wards and to Nevada County. The wards have the opportunity to develop employment skills and complete their education, while various groups in the county benefit from access to an economical source of labor. In addition, during the fire season, an efficiently run operation at the Washington Ridge Camp is a vital resource for fire prevention and suppression.

RESPONSES

None required