

Nevada County Superior Courthouse Holding Facility

Summary

The replacement of the Nevada County Courthouse in Nevada City has long been a topic of discussion. Recently, the California Administrative Office of the Court prepared a feasibility report and held meetings on the subject. The California Penal Code requires the Nevada County Grand Jury to inspect annually the holding facility located in the Courthouse as to its condition and management.

Although the holding facility at the Courthouse was determined to be adequate for its purpose, the Nevada County Grand Jury found several issues in need of attention. These issues primarily revolve around security of inmates and the safety of the public and Courthouse employees. Since the timeframe for replacement of the current Courthouse has not been fully defined, the Nevada County Grand Jury recommends that the items of concern noted during their inspection should be addressed immediately.

Reasons 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 (Jury) defines public prisons as any adult or juvenile correction or detention facility within the county.

Procedures Followed

The Jury inspected the holding facility at the Nevada County Courthouse (Courthouse) in Nevada City on October 12, 2010 and interviewed the staff of the holding facility. The Jury reviewed the Nevada County Sheriff's Office Court Holding Division Directive 18, dated August 11, 2000, and the Administrative Office of the Court, Superior Court of California, County of Nevada, New Nevada City Courthouse Project Feasibility Report, dated June 9, 2010. http://www.courts.ca.gov/xbcr/cc/nevada_pfr.pdf

Background

The Courthouse has occupied the present location since 1855. The current courthouse was completed in 1865 replacing the previous one destroyed by fire. In 1900, the building was remodeled and in 1936-37, an extensive renovation of the building was done under the

depression-era Works Project Administration (WPA). The courthouse annex was added in 1963. It housed the county jail until the building of the Wayne Brown Correctional Facility (WBCF) in 1992 and still houses the court holding facility. The Courthouse is jointly owned by the State of California and Nevada County.

The Jury is aware that the California Administrative Office of the Court is in the early stages of planning the replacement of the Courthouse. However, the Jury concludes it is important to highlight relevant findings concerning the current courthouse and make recommendations to improve conditions.

Facts

1. There is a holding facility in the Courthouse for inmates transported from WBCF for court appearances and meetings with attorneys.
2. The external doors of vans transporting inmates from WBCF are equipped with standard factory-installed locks.
3. Transport vans are driven into the enclosed parking garage located below the Courthouse holding facility.
4. The parking garage entrance and exit have remote-access, roll-up security gates.
5. The Jury observed that the timing cycle allows roll-up gates in the parking garage to remain open longer than necessary for a vehicle to enter or exit.
6. The fenced and gated enclosure, commonly known as a sally port, allows inmates to be loaded and unloaded in a secure area before being taken by elevator to the holding cells.
7. At the time of inspection, the Jury was told the roll-up security gate on the sally port is not always lowered and secured during movement of the inmates.
8. If there is a transport van parked in the sally port, additional transports load and unload inmates in the non-secured area of the parking garage.
9. Several surveillance cameras, recommended in previous Jury reports, have been installed in the Courthouse and are monitored by Sheriff's personnel.
10. The surveillance cameras installed in the parking garage do not provide viewing of all sections of the garage.
11. The inmate transport elevator does not have a surveillance camera installed.

12. There is a surveillance camera blind spot in an area of the Courthouse used by both the public and inmates.
13. In-custody inmate movement between the holding facility and courtrooms takes place in unsecured public corridors.

Findings

1. Standard factory-installed locks on inmate transportation vans do not provide sufficient safety and security for inmates and Sheriff's personnel.
2. The length of time the parking garage gates are open could allow unauthorized individuals to enter or exit the garage.
3. Inconsistent use of the sally port increases the possibility of security issues.
4. The inability to monitor all sections of the parking garage endangers those using the garage.
5. The absence of a surveillance camera in the inmate transport elevator may jeopardize the safety of Sheriff's personnel and inmates.
6. The surveillance camera blind spot in the Courthouse may jeopardize the safety of individuals in that area.
7. Employees, inmates and the public may be at risk when hallways are not cleared before moving inmates to courtrooms.

Recommendations

The Nevada County Sheriff should direct staff to:

1. Install upgraded locks controlled by the driver in all inmate transport vans.
2. Properly use the sally port for loading and unloading of all inmates.
3. Clear individuals from hallways when inmates are moved to courtrooms.

The Nevada County Sheriff should negotiate with the Nevada County Superior Court to:

4. Reduce the length of time the parking garage roll-up gates remain open.
5. Install additional surveillance cameras in the parking garage.

6. Install surveillance cameras in the inmate transport elevator.
7. Install additional surveillance cameras to eliminate the Courthouse blind spot.

Responses

Nevada County Sheriff' Office – August 8, 2011