



EXCLUSIVE LOOK BEHIND BARS: IDOC Treatment For Mentally Ill Offenders

By: Akilah Davis

Wednesday, July 27th, 2016

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (WICS) — The IDOC reached a settlement in May requiring the agency to enhance the way mentally ill offenders receive treatment. We're now learning the terms of that agreement. In part two of our special report, we take an exclusive look beyond prison walls at one of the new residential treatment units.

The mission behind the residential treatment units is to provide more of a structured level of care for mentally ill offenders. Our cameras are the first in the state to go behind bars and witness some of the treatment options available at a local RTU (residential treatment units).

Inside the new residential treatment unit at the Logan Correctional Center are 76 cells; room for about 120 mentally ill offenders.

"Depression, mood disorders, schizophrenia, psychotic disorders, bipolar and you name it," said IDOC Chief of Mental Health Services, Dr. Melvin Hinton.

Dr. Hinton says once inmates are admitted to the facility, they are given mental and physical evaluations. This is just one way IDOC is able to identify who is mentally ill, and who is not. The cells in the unit are the same size as regular prison cells. The cell doors now have wide windows giving officers a better view of who is inside. Once inside the cell, you'll notice a call button.

"If somebody has an emergency or needs something, they have a way of getting ahold of the officer stationed on the wing," said Dr. Hinton.

Other modifications include larger windows, which allow more natural light in and can help with symptoms like depression. Plus, there are changes to the way cell bunks are constructed.

"They'll have access to new bunks that are retrofitted for safety so that there are no tie off points for potential suicide," said Dr. Hinton.

Hinton says a little more than 11,000 offenders within IDOC are considered mentally ill. At the Logan Correctional Center, thirty percent of offenders are. He calls these new features an honest attempt at providing treatment to all of them.

Footsteps away from the cells are group therapy sessions. Offenders attending group learn coping skills and anger management, among other things.

"They're learning to trust. They're learning to trust they're mental health providers. They're learning to trust themselves," said Dr. Hinton. "They're learning to be able to say, 'I am mentally ill' and not feel stigmatized by that. They shouldn't feel ashamed by that."

There's also a therapy dog available for mentally ill offenders. Offenders have trained this dog to act as a barrier between its owner and an outsider just in case the individual has crowd anxiety. IDOC Director John Baldwin says these new policies are a step in the right direction.

"We need to start setting expectations for them on how to behave," said John Baldwin.

He says it's too early to see the difference it makes, but claims once the new policies are up and running, its results will be undeniable.

"The number [of] staff assaults will decrease, the number of offenders coming back to prison once they are released will decrease, and they will return to Illinois communities much better prepared to hold a job. They will be able to deal with family and become a functioning member of society," said Baldwin.

Another part of the settlement requires IDOC to give mentally ill offenders more time out of their cells. It's been decided that they'll get a minimum of 20 hours a week. Inmates will begin moving into the new RTU at the Logan Correctional Center as early as August.

<http://newschannel20.com/news/local/exclusive-lookbehind-bars-at-the>