

BERKS COUNTY PRISON BOARD MINUTES
APRIL 13, 2022

The Berks County Prison Board met in a regular session on Wednesday, April 13, 2022, at 9:00 A.M. in a Microsoft Teams Meeting.

CALL TO ORDER:

Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt called the meeting to order at 9:00 A.M.

The following members were in attendance:

Commissioner Christian Leinbach
Commissioner Michael Rivera
Commissioner Kevin Barnhardt
District Attorney John Adams
Secretary Sandra Graffius
Sheriff Eric J. Weaknecht

The following were absent:

Judge Scott Lash

The following County staff also attended:

Executive Assistant Jessica Blausler
Solicitor Christine Sadler
Deputy Warden-Custody Jeffrey Schearer
Warden Jeffrey Smith
Chief Deputy Warden Stephanie Smith
Steering Committee- Bob Williams

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A motion was made to approve the March 9, 2022, meeting minutes as presented. Motion carried.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

JAIL SENIOR STAFF REPORTS

INMATE POPULATION: Warden Jeffrey Smith stated the inmate population was 712. Fifty- three inmates sentenced to SCI. Twenty-eight are scheduled to leave by April 26, 2022. Seventeen inmates are waiting for a transport in May. Eight are not issued a transport date.

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CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS AT THE JAIL: On Monday, April 4th, the masking mandate was lifted in most areas of the Jail. Beginning Monday, May 1st, in-person visitation will be increased to (2) 30-minute visits per month for eligible inmates. Inmates will continue to be provided with (2) 15-minute video visits per week. The jail is working on increasing our programming efforts and returning to conducting in-person groups again.

CGL will be onsite at the Jail in mid-May to conduct Programming Phase meetings.

Department of Corrections was onsite for their annual Title 37 inspection. They will issue their formal report later. But at the debrief meeting they stated that the jail was consistently overall great with a few minor issues that were addressed and corrected before the inspectors left.

PREA audit was conducted last week. No issues with the prevention efforts and was impressed with the professionalism of all the staff. There are a few corrective actions to be addressed. A final report should be submitted sometime in July.

PROGRAMS: Chief Deputy Warden Stephanie Smith updated the Board about the discussions between Schuylkill Valley School District and BCIU to continue to offer services at the jail. Chief Smith received an email at the end of March from BCIU stating they reached an agreement with Schuylkill Valley School for the next two school years. There is no change to the services that they offer for the high school diploma program. Commissioner Leinbach wanted to note that there is a legitimate concern that should be addressed with CCAP that the fundamental cost issue is driven by the current model that the Commonwealth has in place. At 19 students the school district breaks even and because of the dramatic decline of over the last several years the number of students is well below that. Which means that the Schuylkill Valley School District and taxpayers are picking up the difference. The school board members believe that is unfair they have approached the county about picking up the difference. However, this is an agreement between the BCIU and Schuylkill Valley School District. This is a Commonwealth funded program. They have been asked to get details to the county so we could advocate for changes. Commissioner Leinbach believes this is resolved on a temporary basis. There are 12 inmates signed up for the diploma program this year. One suggestion that was made was to make this a BCIU based program versus a school district program and then it would come out of the BCIU budget and then the shortfall would be picked up by everyone. Chief Smith will follow up with Commissioner Barnhardt with the financial shortfall for the last few years. District Attorney Adams stated that it is unfair to Schuylkill Valley and mentioned that the school district of the children at Bethany Children's Home reimburses Conrad Weiser for the educational costs of those students.

Chief Smith informed the board that vaccines are continued to be offered to the inmate populations for COVID-19. Narcan kits are being offered to at risk individuals who are leaving the institution. There is a 30 % acceptance rate this first quarter. There is hope to provide more education and increase interest.

STAFFING: Deputy Warden-Custody Jeffrey Schearer updated the Board on the status of the staffing; there are 34 Correctional Officer vacancies. And one Sargent vacancy. There are 3 cadets in the academy that are scheduled to graduate the first week of May. There are 5 candidates that are still in the hiring process from the March testing. There are 4 candidates from last week's testing. Both groups will be combined and are looking at a start day of May 25th for the new academy. The next testing is scheduled for May 16th and June 15th.

SOLICITOR'S REPORT

Solicitor Christine Sadler has no items to report and no items for executive session.

STEERING COMMITTEE

Commissioner Barnhardt updated the board on the Steering Committee. There is a needs assessment scheduled for April 14th in the Commissioners Boardroom. Facility tours are scheduled for April 26th in Nashville. And the downtown detention center April 27th in Columbus, Ohio. The transition team from the jail as well as several people from the Steering Committee will be part of the group. Visits to these two county run facilities is geared toward mental health. There is no plan to visit anywhere beyond the two facilities. The branding and communication of the logo, tagline, and initial statement had been approved by the Steering Committee. Considerations are being made to incorporate Spanish dialect on the project website and the Steering Committee is compiling list of stakeholder groups for public outreach which will begin in mid-May. There will be times where the Prison Board will be invited to participate to hear their ideas. Commissioner Leinbach had a discussion on changing the title from facility to center. The jail provides evidence-based programming that impacts the lives of individuals with the hope that they return to society as law abiding and productive citizens. This is something that will be potentially discussed at the OPS meeting next week. Commissioner Leinbach believes that the Berks County Correctional Center is a more positive and definitive name other than Berks County Correctional Facility. It was a recommendation by Warden Smith for the name of Berks County Correctional Facility. Warden Smith explained he feels strongly about it being called facility to keep the victims in mind. The jail is bound by the courts to hold the inmates for what they've done or for pretrial and the Warden feels the word facility highlights that. District Attorney John Adams wants everyone to remember the Berks County Jail is a holding facility for many individuals before they are transferred to a more permanent place such as the Department of Corrections. The County is dealing with a rash of violent offenders and the jail is just a holding facility until they go through the court process which they are entitled to by the Constitution. He wants everyone to remember that not everyone going in is getting out.

Bob Williams stated most are looking for the inmates to be rehabilitated not necessarily looking for inmates to be punished. Mr. Williams thanked the commissioners for the opportunity to serve on the Hearing Committee and applaud for transparency through this process.


Commissioner Leinbach made a motion to change the wording in the mission statement from legally incarcerated to temporarily incarcerated and change the name from facility to center. Commissioner Barnhardt seconded the motion. The motion was carried. This will have final approval on Tuesday by the Board of Commissioners. The Steering Committee approved the tagline of "*Opportunity for Change*" Commissioner Leinbach made a motion to recommend the new logo and tagline to the Commissioner OPS meeting next week. Commissioner Rivera seconded. The motion was carried. Pam Shupp will be taking over responsibilities from Ron Seaman on the Steering Committee on April 19th. The needs assessment presentation will be in the boardroom April 14th at 1:00. There will be a final presentation at a future budget OPS meeting but that hasn't been determined yet. The website will be up and running by the middle of May. This will be correctional center focused website. Bob Williams mentioned that County Criminal Justice System does not do a good job in promoting all the good things the county is doing. The jail population is lower today due to the efforts of the criminal justice actors to make those changes while keeping the community safe. The electronic monitoring took more people out of the jail which was a good financial deal for the taxpayers. Ultimately aggressive means being smart on crime. Using data to drive decision making. The County keeps communities safe by affecting long term behavior change from the inmates that come through the system. Berks County is way ahead way ahead of many other counties in our state. That is attributed that to teamwork and being smart on the problems.

PUBLIC COMMENT

None.

ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Commissioner Barnhardt to adjourn at 9:38 A.M. The next Prison Board meeting will be held on May 11, 2022.



Sandy Graffius, Prison Board Secretary