



SOLANO COUNTY GRAND JURY
2019-2020

Delta Conservation Camp Recruitment Challenges

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I. SUMMARY

The 2019-2020 Solano County Civil Grand Jury, in accordance with California Penal Code section 919(b), conducted tours and inquiries into the operation of Delta Camp. The collaboration of California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and Cal Fire has resulted in the creation of vocational training facilities and programs for inmates in the areas of firefighting and firefighter support activities since 1988. In the course of the inquiries, it was noted that the system to continue training and utilizing a large force of inmate fire fighters is in jeopardy.

II. INTRODUCTION

Northern California has eighteen firefighting training camps with a total capacity of 1,910 inmates. There are approximately 1,250 inmates, 67% of capacity of these facilities, being lodged and being trained in firefighting and various support roles. An additional 660 trained inmate firefighters in Northern California need to be added to reach that capacity.

Delta Camp is one of the eighteen training camps and is authorized to accommodate 120 inmates (with a 10% overage when necessary). As of the date of this report the camp has a population of 70.

Since inmates' release dates are still in effect while in the camp, replacement of released inmates is a necessary activity. Delta Camp depends upon the prison population of lesser felons in Susanville to provide candidates. Processing begins after inmates express an interest in being assigned to the program. Prior to being placed, candidates undergo a meticulous background check. Testing and interviews are also part of the selection process. CDCR and Cal Fire apply arduous physical and mental training to the candidates who have acceptable backgrounds and are fluent in English.

The system to recruit and train depends on having numerous candidates in one facility from which to select. Assembly Bill 109 (the Prison Realignment Act of 2011) and Proposition 47 (the Reduced Penalties for some Crimes Initiative of 2014), which require rehousing of inmates from State prisons to County facilities, scatter potential candidates and makes the process very cumbersome.

III. METHODOLOGY

Tours of Delta Camp Facility
Interviewed CDCR Staff
Interviewed Cal Fire Staff
Reviewed Assembly Bill 109 (2011)
Reviewed Proposition 47 (2014)

IV. STATEMENT OF FACTS

The exact recidivism rate of released Delta Camp inmates is unknown; however, it is recognized as being one of the lowest in the CDCR. The vocational, educational and personal training programs enhance social, work and personal qualities for individuals and assist them in being employable as they assimilate into society. Inmates getting jobs when released is a major factor in reducing recidivism. Delta Camp provides programs which help inmates achieve educational goals. Self-study high school and college level courses and other instructional materials are provided by CDCR from Susanville Prison.

When not actively fighting fires, Delta Camp provides inmate teams for community work projects in Solano County, such as weed abatement and defensible space clearing. Such projects are designed to help prevent the spread of fires and to improve the environment in the region. As of the date of the writing of this report, there are ninety proposed projects which are on hold while inmate firefighters battle wildland fires.

There are no physical restraints, fences or walls. Freedom of movement is one of the benefits of being incarcerated at Delta Camp. Prisoner behavior is on the honor system. Inmates are trusted to acknowledge the prescribed perimeters of the camp and rules of behavior. Failing to adhere to the boundaries outlined and other rules of behavior results in immediate return to Susanville Prison. There has been only one physical altercation and one “walk away” recorded by camp staff in the last six and a half years.

Inmates are expected to recognize that there are no ethnic differentiations. They are trained to work as a team and are responsible for each other’s safety and progress.

The system to recruit and train depends on having numerous candidates in one facility from which to select. Procedures set by Cal Fire and CDCR do not allow inmates to be placed in the same county in which they were sentenced. Assembly Bill 109 and Proposition 47 requiring rehousing of inmates from State prisons to County facilities scatter potential candidates and this make the process very cumbersome.

Delta Camp staff informed the Grand Jury that due to current legislation there is concern that the training program will disappear. Because of the realignment of prison inmates, there are insufficient qualified candidates available for the program as they are going to county jails as opposed to state prisons. Staff also informed the Grand Jury that the lack of English fluency is a barrier to finding acceptable candidates.

Due to recent legislative changes, lesser felon candidates are no longer available for the recruiting and replacement efforts of the CDCR and Cal Fire program. Losing a valuable potential asset of 1,910 trained firefighters reduces the ability to assist in the containment and control of wildfires. The loss of the program would negatively affect two important assets: trained firefighters and reduced recidivism.

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1 - The recruiting system relies on having numerous candidates in only one facility from which to select.

Recommendation 1 – CDCR and Cal Fire expand their recruitment system to find more potential trainees from other correctional facilities, such as county jails.

Finding 2 – The requirement for fluency in English has negatively impacted the program.

Recommendation 2 – The county jail systems provide English language education opportunities for inmates to increase communication skills thereby increasing the number of viable candidates for the program.

COMMENTS

Legislators need to research the effects and consequences of any proposed legislation. Their research should include consultation with the agencies affected by any potential legislation. Assembly Bill 109 (the Prison Realignment Act) and Proposition 47 (the Reduced Penalties for some Crimes Initiative) have had a negative impact on the fire camp population, limiting the potential number of candidates.

The Delta Camp concept provides two exceptional assets for the State of California: reduced recidivism and a trained firefighter force. These assets need to be protected.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Battalion Chief, Delta Camp/Cal Fire (all findings)

Facility Commander, Delta Camp/California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (all findings)

Solano County Sheriff’s Office (all findings)

COURTESY COPIES

Governor Gavin Newsom

California State Assembly

California State Senate