

# Cost-Effective Jail Design & Operation



By David M. Parrish

According to the National Institute of Corrections, during the 30-year life span of a jail, 90 percent of its total cost is allocated to operating expenses, while only 10 percent is attributed to the initial construction.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, while the greatest controversy surrounding a new jail is generally centered on the cost of building it, a staff-efficient design is far more important. This is further supported by the fact that salaries and benefits account for 70 percent to 80 percent of the annual operating budget of most jails, reported NIC.

The evolution of the jail system in Hillsborough County (Tampa), Fla., during the past 25 years serves as a case history to demonstrate the importance of good design and operating practices in order to achieve more efficient and effective facilities. In 1981, the Hillsborough County Jail System held 1,200 inmates in four jails and a work release center. Today, all of those facilities are closed and/or demolished and have been replaced by two large direct-supervision jails and a work release center with a total rated capacity of 4,190. The Orient Road Jail was built in 1990 and has a rated capacity of 1,711; the Falkenburg Road Jail was built in 1998 and expanded in 2003, and has a capacity of 2,304; and the Work Release Center was built in 1990, expanded in 1993, and has a capacity of 175.

Of the nearly 3,300 jail administrators in the United States, only a few have an opportunity to build a new facility. Hillsborough County represents the other end of the spectrum, where the same commander has been in place since 1981, and a consistent team of staff has been involved in design, construction and operation of approximately 1.5 million square feet of jail space during a 25-year period. Through practical experience, building jails in Hillsborough County has evolved into an innovative and cost-effective science, which results in efficient and easily managed facilities that — most importantly — are good, safe workplaces for staff.

## Direct Supervision In Hillsborough County

When the linear design wings of the Morgan Street Jail opened in 1964, staffing was not an issue. Since there were no standards that required officers to be within sight or hearing of the inmates, the one critical post on each floor was the control room. When the podular remote Morgan Street Jail annex opened in 1981, it was considered state of the art. Unfortunately, no one took action to hire additional staff until the structure was almost complete. By then, the sheriff's budget was already locked in and any thought of asking the board of county commissioners for 96 new positions was quickly abandoned. It took several years to slowly obtain funding for the required deputies.

In 1982, NIC funded a "hosted visit" for the administrator and three senior supervisors so that they could learn about direct supervision first hand. They toured three facilities: the Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC) in Chicago; the MCC in Tucson, Ariz.; and the Contra Costa County Jail in Martinez, Calif. Prior to the trip, the participants expressed a common belief that direct supervision was just a fad and that it would not work in Hillsborough County where "real" inmates would destroy the facility. After the

trip, those same supervisors wrote glowing reports to the sheriff about the practicality of direct supervision. NIC then sent the sheriff on the same hosted visit. When he returned, he said, “There is a better way to do business, and we need to take care of our staff.” That committed the Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office to direct supervision as the practical way to operate a jail.

The construction of the Orient Road Jail followed a traditional design-bid-build formula. While that process was under way, a temporary 384-bed facility was built using trailers as a stopgap measure to deal with overcrowding. It opened in 1988, and was supposed to be on line for only three years, but was not actually closed until 2003.

The trailers provided an opportunity to train staff on the principles of direct supervision. Every officer rotated through over a period of several years. Even sergeants and corporals were assigned a two-month stint in a pod. They maintained their salary, but were required to wear a deputy’s uniform so that they could appreciate direct supervision from the officer’s perspective.

## Capacity and Classification

The Orient Road Jail opened in 1990. Originally designed with a rated capacity of 1,330 and 48 to a pod, it never operated that way. Overcrowding forced expansion to a rated capacity of 1,711 and 64 to a pod. The number 64 was determined by deliberately crowding a pod (in the temporary trailers) until the deputy was not able to cope well with the additional inmates. The limitation of 64 to a pod was subsequently adopted by the American Correctional Association Standards Committee based on Hillsborough County’s experience.

When the Orient Road Jail opened, many tasks previously accomplished by deputies were assigned to civilian staff. During a three-year period, more than 100 sworn positions were converted to civilian (support) status. An existing civil-service job category, community service officer, became the norm for these positions. Because they do not receive special risk retirement benefits and are paid one-third less than a deputy, for every deputy position that was civilianized, one and a half community service officers were hired. This allowed for a significant expansion of resources without an increase in budgeted funds. Today, community service officers represent the second largest job category behind deputy. Including other support categories, civilians account for more than one-third of detention department staff. Community service officers now work in booking, control rooms, property rooms, public counters, video visitation, custodial and paint crews, records, programs, laundry, canteen and mail rooms.

Direct supervision works well as long as 10 percent of capacity is single-cell confinement (lockdown) space. Larry Ard, first commander of the Contra Costa County Jail (the first direct supervision county jail in the United States), held to this tenet. Experience has proved him to be correct. The 10 percent rule allows adequate space for disciplinary and administrative confinement, protective custody and psychiatric lockdown. Of course, this assumes that a reasonable classification system is in place (e.g., the NIC Objective Jail Classification System<sup>2</sup>).

In many jurisdictions, over-classification results from dependence on the terms maximum, medium and minimum custody. Although there may be a local definition, there is no uniform regional or national definition of these terms. Recognizing that “maximum security” connotes danger and assignment to lockdown, but understanding that the charge alone does not really determine the need for maximum security, Hillsborough County converted to a more reasonable standard. Inmates are housed in three security levels: confinement (single cell), general population and reduced custody.

Confinement is lockdown. By definition, this means only one person to a cell, otherwise it would not be confinement; it would be multiple-occupancy housing. General population is direct supervision housing. Regardless of offense, any inmates can be placed there, as long as they abide by facility rules and staff instructions. The secure exterior wall of the pod ensures that they will not escape. Reduced custody is the equivalent of a work release center where a commercial grade structure suffices.

## Placing “Real” Inmates in Dorms

While construction of the Orient Road Jail was under way in 1987 and 1988, detention department staff undertook an 18-month effort to find a site for future jail expansion. That work culminated in the acquisition of 140 acres on Falkenburg Road, just three miles east of the Orient Road Jail. In 1993, the trailers were moved to that location and in 1998, the first phase (768 beds) of permanent housing opened there.

In planning for the Falkenburg Road Jail, a number of considerations came into play, including the fact that a large site was available — 140 acres, the budget was limited, the county had selected the design-build process in order to expedite the project, and staff survey results reflected the likes and dislikes of deputies with regard to their experience working at the Orient Road Jail.

The last category, in particular, was especially important. A good facility is designed for the people who work in it. After all, inmates come and go at a prodigious rate (24 days on average in Hillsborough County), but staff remain in the facility for 10, 20 or 30 years. The following quotations are indicative of opinions voiced by staff during the planning process of the Falkenburg Road Jail:

- “I like direct supervision and the control it allows.”
- “I don’t like the mezzanine level. I can’t see what is going on upstairs.”
- “I don’t like all those cells. They have to be inspected.”

It became apparent that the Falkenburg Road Jail would represent a significant departure from the Orient Road Jail design. Single-cell construction for general population was out of the question due to a limited budget. The basic pod size of 64 had to be maintained rather than reverting to 48 because of cost and staff efficiency. That meant multiple-occupancy cells, but which combination was best — two, four, 16 or more to a cell? The final decision to build 64-bed direct supervision dormitories for general population was

driven by economics. If administrators are going to save money, they might as well save a lot of money.

The Falkenburg Road Jail is characterized by its standard direct supervision dormitory design. It has the economy of prison construction — inexpensive, free-standing buildings inside a large double-fenced compound — and the operation of a jail by compressing the buildings close together and eliminating the typical prison yard. The jail's buildings are connected by walkways, which do not have to be heated or air conditioned. Pods are one story; they have no mezzanine level. Ceilings are high and capped by clerestory lighting; a small roof with vertical windows sits atop the main roof, similar to old-time factory designs. Walls are pre-cast concrete and roofs are metal. Each pod has a time-out cell, which provides the officer flexibility and control in dealing with inmates. Each pod has three video visitation stations and a secure recreation yard. Open-faced sleeping cubicles holding four inmates each are located around the perimeter of the pod. Most fixtures and furnishing do not require "detention grade" materials.

In the first phase of construction (768 beds in 1998), the walls were poured on site, then tilted up. In the second phase (1,536 beds in 2003), walls were pre-cast off-site. This resulted in smaller components and more joints, but harder, stronger concrete than the tilt-up method. Refinement in the design of the confinement unit resulted in a savings of 20 positions. The confinement unit is comprised of four 64-bed pods — all single-cell construction.

The design features of the Falkenburg Road Jail, coupled with innovative construction techniques, resulted in a remarkably economical building. The cost per bed for dormitory housing was \$13,000 (2003 dollars), while the cost per bed for confinement housing was \$28,500 (1998 dollars). Those figures reflect construction cost, not total project cost. Not included are such things as fees, site work, equipment and support/administrative space.

When practitioners from other jurisdictions first heard about the Falkenburg Road Jail design and operation, their reaction was similar to the statements made about direct supervision 20 years ago: "You can't put real inmates in a dorm. It can only hold trusties or minimum-custody inmates." Experience has proved that this is not the case. There is no difference in classification level for general population between the Orient Road Jail and the Falkenburg Road Jail. Direct supervision is direct supervision whether the pod has cells or is a dormitory. The secure custody level is achieved by the 10 inch thick pre-cast concrete exterior wall and the deputy who works in the pod. As long as 10 percent of capacity is single-cell confinement space, properly designed dormitories can (and should) become the preferred standard for housing general population inmates in county jails.

For seven years, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office Detention Department has used the direct supervision dormitory as the prototypical housing pod. With only minor modifications, it has been replicated and built incrementally as needed. With 2,304 beds already on line at the Falkenburg Road Jail, the next two phases of construction will result in a 4,000-bed facility on that site by 2010.

During the past 20 years, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office has developed a cost-effective, staff-efficient jail

system through a combination of factors. They include: a commitment to direct supervision, a large jail site, a dormitory design for general population, a ratio of 10 percent confinement space to 90 percent general population housing, and civilianizing many positions. The success of this comprehensive approach is easily measured by tracking productivity levels over time. In the final analysis, staff efficiency has increased by 53 percent since 1994.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Farbstein, J. 1986. *Correctional facility planning and design*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co.

<sup>2</sup> The Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office was one of three agencies in the mid-1980s to participate in the development and pilot testing of the NIC Model Objective Jail Classification System.

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The Morgan Street Jail was opened in 1964; an annex was added in 1981. It was decommissioned and closed in January 2004.



When it opened in 1990, the Orient Road Jail was the largest direct supervision jail in the United States. It has a rated capacity of 1,711. Central Booking is co-located and 66,344 inmates were processed in 2003.