

The California Department of Corrections operates 32 prisons, 40 fire conservation camps, and several community inmate-mother programs and family foundation programs in facilities housing about 162,000 inmates. It also oversees an average of about 115,000 parolees annually who serve three years on parole. These correctional facilities and programs are operated at the public's expense for the protection of society, and the department believes that the public has a right and a duty to know how such facilities and programs are being operated.

The agency believes that it is vital to keep the public informed primarily through the news media about activities involving DOC staff, and the inmates and parolees who are supervised. The agency welcomes news media to its facilities — from small weekly newspapers to large international news outlets. As former warden of San Quentin State Prison, California's oldest and arguably one of the world's best known prisons, the author made it a practice to speak with reporters and other journalists whenever possible. With its scenic locale and historic significance, it was a natural choice of subject matter and story setting for local San Francisco Bay area reporters as well as those from around the world who were writing about the department.

California's prison media policies are set by the California Code of Regulations, Title 15, and the agency encourages members of the media to visit any of its facilities — within the limitations outlined in these regulations. The challenge in California, with its large prison and parolee population, is to balance media interest with good public policy and keep in mind operational safety and security.

The DOC's policies permit print, broadcast and radio news representatives to visit any of its prisons with prior notice. The department does its best to accommodate reporters with deadlines on breaking news stories, but it must ensure those reporters have the proper security clearances before they visit. Fortunately, the agency's institutions have developed excellent working relationships with local reporters, and many reporters keep their clearances current for such occurrences. Journalists and filmmakers may interview inmates in the yard, in the classrooms, while they work — virtually anywhere in the prison — with limited restrictions. They may film these inmates and take their photographs with the inmates' signed permission.

Relationships And Restrictions

The DOC's regulations have two primary restrictions: it does not permit specific inmate face-to-face interviews (except within the context of the general visiting program) nor does it permit filming on death row or on-camera interviews with condemned inmates. There are many reasons for these restrictions, such as glorifying the inmate's crime, victim

concerns, time constraints for public information officers at many of the more well-known institutions who must accompany the reporters, and other relevant issues. Over the past several sessions, the California Legislature has written and passed legislation that would expand these policies to allow such interviews. While the department does not take official positions on all legislation that affects the department, it has testified in Senate committees against the proposed changes to its media policies. The DOC firmly believes that the current media policies do not require amending. Apparently, two former governors and the current governor agree; legislation to expand media access has been vetoed.

The bulk of the department's media requests are handled by the communications office. With its four professional communications staff members and full-service media center, the office is the primary conduit through which media visits to prisons are arranged. Each prison's warden has assigned a staff member — usually of a custody classification — as his or her administrative assistant as well as the institution's public information officer. These public information officers collaborate frequently with the headquarters of the communications office.

The department's communications office fields between 150 to 200 media calls weekly from local, state, national and international media. This does not include calls made directly to the various institutions and parole offices. While some calls are routine and may be answered quickly with minimal of research, the majority of calls require hours of

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By Jeanne S. Woodford



additional effort, gathering information from or coordinating with a variety of sources. They often require setting up interviews with staff members who oversee particular areas of interest, and may include teachers, substance abuse counselors or health care professionals. There are reporters, filmmakers or others from the media in one of the DOC's prisons every working day — and often on weekends. This speaks volumes of the agency's willingness to open itself to scrutiny and close examination, to discuss issues and share information, and to provide opportunities to observe the prisons at work.

The California DOC is fortunate to have established excellent working relationships with most reporters who cover law enforcement. In fact, it encourages institutional public information officers to invite local beat reporters to tour facilities, to interview wardens and other senior managers, and to get a sense of how the prison operates. These efforts pay off when there is breaking news or if there is a newsworthy event involving staff, inmates or both.

Experiences With The Media

The many media outlets the department has hosted over the years include *60 Minutes*, *Nightline With Ted Koppel*, *The Today Show*, *Primetime Live*, *Larry King*, National Public Radio, and the Discovery and Learning channels, as well as a myriad of newspapers, magazines and other periodicals. The DOC's experiences with the media are generally positive, but it has had its share of negative reporters and slanted stories. While it cannot control what stories are produced or written, the department makes every effort to provide current and accurate information and access to its facilities.

A few years ago, *Nightline With Ted Koppel* spent more than a week at two of California's women's institutions: Central California Women's Facility and Valley State Prison for Women. He and his crew interviewed the wardens, administrative and line staff, health care professionals, counselors and inmates. Koppel focused on gender-specific programs for

female inmates, including parenting programs, family reunification and health care issues, as well as programs offered at some or all of the department's facilities such as substance abuse programs, jobs training, and academic and vocational courses. Koppel was permitted to interview and film staff and inmates in virtually all prison areas. He walked on the yard, in housing units, in classrooms and in the culinary area. He toured the female death row at Central California Women's Facility, speaking briefly with those inmates, but was not allowed to film there due to policy restrictions. The resulting five-part series was aired with much local affiliate promotion nationwide, and the department received additional inquiries about the program from other state DOCs, state legislators and other media outlets interested in filming similar series.

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When media celebrity Robert Downey Jr. was incarcerated at the California Substance Abuse Treatment Facility and State Prison (not to be confused with Corcoran State Prison), the facility received requests for interviews from virtually every corner of the world. Much of what was written about him was erroneous, despite the agency's efforts to set the record straight and provide factual information.

One nationally recognized daytime show wanted to come to the facility for a story on Downey and was granted permission on the grounds that the producer agreed that the story would be about the substance abuse programs offered at the institution and if the reporters agreed to speak with the other inmates living in the housing unit. Unfortunately, the show did not focus on any of the outstand-

ing programs offered by the substance abuse provider who is contracted nor did it focus much time on other inmates with whom Downey lived, worked and participated in group activities. In addition, the show's lead-in portrayed him as living with other notorious inmates, including Charles Manson and Sirhan Sirhan, both of whom are housed at the other prison in Corcoran.

And just recently, the Discovery Channel's popular *Monster Garage* series submitted a proposal to film a show at Folsom State Prison. The show's star, Jesse James, and his crew were interested in working with inmates who participate in the vocational auto body shop program. The show's producers visited the prison, met with the warden and his staff, as well as the inmates who were to be part of the show. They filmed on location for a full week, and returned to the institution in late April to put the finishing touches on the "monster" vehicle that the crew and inmates collaborated on. The show donated specialized tools to the vocational program, and the inmates may be able to receive their own set of tools once they have completed their parole.

While the California DOC makes every effort to accommodate the media, there are occasions when it is impossible. An institution may be on a lockdown, or the area in which the film crew wants to film may be restricted. The agency rarely permits filming in what is called sensitive needs yards — security housing units or medical areas — due to the types of inmates housed there.

Balancing the right of the public to know how tax dollars are being spent with ongoing requests and increasing requirements of around-the-clock media, production companies and others may appear difficult. But they are handled reasonably well by respecting media deadlines and requests for information, taking into account the DOC's true mission: supervising felons, preparing them for eventual release back to their communities, and helping them become productive and contributing members of society.

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