

**2014-15  
Fresno County Grand Jury  
Report No. 1**

# Pleasant Valley State Prison at 20 years

## INTRODUCTION

In compliance with California Penal Code Section 919 (b), “The grand jury shall inquire into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county,” the 2014-15 Fresno County Grand Jury conducted its annual inquiry of the Pleasant Valley State Prison (PVSP). The grand jury visited PVSP on Sept. 24, 2014 and was received with hospitality by two prison officials, who accompanied the Grand Jury on a tour, providing information and answering all questions.

A three-hour inspection included administrative areas, grounds, the interior and exterior of one inmate housing unit, the library, kitchen, in-patient medical facilities and out-patient medical, dental, and pharmacy facilities. To a person, the PSVP staff was pleasant and professional, freely, and in easy-to-understand language, answering all questions.

## BACKGROUND

One of 32 prisons for men operated by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) – and the only such facility within Fresno County – Pleasant Valley State Prison (PSVP) is at 24863 W. Jayne Ave., Coalinga. PSVP opened in November 1994 and is celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Situated on 334 acres about 5 miles southeast of Coalinga, but within city limits, PVSP is home to more than 3,000 inmates. The facility was designed to hold about 700 fewer, based on single-bed occupancy. Inmates are medium- to high-security risks and are housed in Level I to III facilities. The inmates are serving sentences of several months for petty theft to life without possibility of parole for murder. Thirty-eight percent of PVSP inmates are serving life terms; 18 percent are registered sex offenders.

PVSP has endured a substantial drop in its budget from near \$200 million in 2007-08 to this fiscal year’s \$141.8 million. As of Dec. 31, 2012, PSVP was staffed by approximately 1,500 people, which had dropped to approximately 1,300 when the 2014-15 Grand Jury visited. (Staff reported 40 authorized, but vacant positions.) Custody staff totals 700, with 300 noncustody staff and 300 medical workers. Forty percent of PVSP staff reside in Fresno County and 35 percent in Kings County. Seventeen percent of staff live in Avenal or Coalinga, the two incorporated communities closest to the prison.

## PURPOSE OF THE INQUIRY

In fulfilling its mandate to visit Pleasant Valley State Prison, the Grand Jury also sought new information about inmate crowding, Valley Fever and mental health treatment, which were concerns of previous Grand Juries. Specifically, information was requested:

- About the impact of recent court and legislative actions to reduce crowded conditions in state prisons.
- About reducing the Valley Fever threat to at-risk inmates.
- About rehabilitative and educational opportunities on site.
- About various operations, including medical and mental health services, the kitchen and living conditions for inmates.

It should be noted that the Grand Jury's inquiry was not the result of any complaints.

## DISCUSSION

### **Prison population**

Pleasant Valley State Prison (PVSP) has undergone recent changes in its inmate population because of realignment shifting more incarceration to local jails, sentencing changes and the migration to other prisons of inmates deemed to be at greater risk for Valley Fever.

In response to previous Grand Jury concerns about crowding, this Grand Jury learned the inmate population at PVSP has declined from 3,757 in October 2011 to 3,041 on Sept. 24, 2014. A California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation report issued a week later said PVSP's inmate population was 3,075 prisoners and that the facility was at 133.2 percent of designed capacity (2,308 men, figuring one person to a cell), slightly below the average systemwide. Cells visited by the Grand Jury were built with bunk beds to accommodate two inmates, rather than the one-to-a-cell capacity standard.

Besides two General Population and two Sensitive Needs housing units (each with about 800 inmates), there is a Minimum Support Facility, housing 107 inmates with minimal custody requirements. The inmates staff California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) crews and work in warehouse, garage, landscaping, recycling, water treatment and administration (helping with visiting facilities) programs. Eight inmates are part of the on-site fire protection service crew that also fulfills mutual-aid obligations in surrounding communities.

The Grand Jury visited inmate housing when few of the inmates were present and found the facilities clean and comfortable on a 94-degree day.

### **Education and vocational training**

Mission statements of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and PVSP emphasize rehabilitation, education and medical treatment to prevent recidivism and keep communities safer.

CDCR: "We protect the public by safely and securely supervising adult and juvenile offenders, providing effective rehabilitation and treatment, and integrating offenders successfully into the community." The department's goals include having a well-trained workforce; integrating information technology into systems that manage current needs and anticipated growth; and developing strategies "to preclude class-action suits and remedy identified violations."

PVSP: “Pleasant Valley State Prison redefines public safety and public service while providing modern long-term housing and professional services for inmates of all custody levels. We provide excellence in state service. While maintaining the highest public safety security protocols, education and career technical skills are offered to inmates through our academic classes, vocational instruction and work programs in order to create viable job skills that are marketable in today’s workforce.” PVSP’s mission statement notes its self-help programs including substance abuse treatment and cognitive behavioral therapy so inmates can “make positive life-changing decisions, while giving back to society.” The prison supports the surrounding community with inmate work crews, mutual-aid fire agreements and a youth diversion program for at-risk children. PVSP also offers one of the state’s first enhanced-program facilities that rewards good behavior as an alternative to punishment for breaking prison rules. PVSP provides professional medical and mental health services for inmates in modern facilities on site.

In addition, the CDCR lists these programmatic goals:

- **Crime Prevention and Safety:** Develop a comprehensive crime prevention program and establish evidence-based research to determine the impact of offender programs within the institutions and community to reduce criminality and victimization.
- **Outreach, Partnerships, and Transparency:** Seek partnerships and develop meaningful programs and processes to promote shared responsibility for community safety.
- **Health Care Delivery:** Ensure an organization design and accompanying systems to provide efficient delivery of quality health care.

Rehabilitation and education have received greater emphasis in recent years at PVSP, which budgets \$4,976,355 for vocational and academic education programs for inmates. PSVP reports 1,400 inmates are enrolled in its nine vocational programs, 13 academic classes and four voluntary education programs.

PVSP offers career training in electrical works, office services, electronic technology, small-engine repair, carpentry, building maintenance, auto body and paint, vehicle engine repair and welding. Adult Basic Education; a GED/high school diploma program; Coastline Community College’s (in Fountain Valley) distance-learning; the California Prison Industry Authority program; and a healthcare-facility maintenance program also are available. PVSP vocational programs for prisoners are evaluated regularly for relevance in helping former inmates find jobs after release to local communities.

A library on site encourages reading and maintains a law library for inmate use.

### **Other services for inmates**

Inmates participate in community-service crews on roads and fighting fires. They also help at religious services and with self-help support organizations, and inmates refurbish bicycles and assist with handicrafts programs.

PVSP honors inmate religious/spiritual/faith diversity by providing facilities for American Indian, Christian, Muslim, Wiccan and other rites.

A family liaison service specialist serves reunification needs of inmates and family members. Inmates receive assistance with pre-release preparation, parenting skills and creative conflict-resolution.

There are private units for conjugal visits between inmates and their partners.

To encourage good behavior by inmates, PVSP has instituted the state's first Enhanced Program Facility "for inmates who choose to refrain from violence, drugs and gang activity," PVSP reported. The program offers bigger TV sets, greater commissary selections, reduced time at the prison and other incentives for positive behavior. PVSP officials report encouraging initial acceptance and participation in this program.

### **Valley Fever**

PVSP reports that only a handful of inmates remain there after a 2013 court ruling that prisoners at higher risk of contracting Valley Fever (*coccidioidomycosis*) would be moved to prisons outside the San Joaquin Valley. Valley Fever is a soil-borne fungus common in the Southwestern United States and Northern Mexico.

A federal court receiver identified African-Americans, Filipinos, inmates older than 55 and those with HIV or suppressed immune systems as at greatest risk for Valley Fever. The receiver acted after legal action was taken in behalf of inmates who died of Valley Fever. The order affected approximately 2,600 inmates at PVSP and Avenal State Prison, about 10 miles away in Kings County.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in early 2014 reported that some staff members at Avenal and Pleasant Valley prisons had died of Valley Fever and others were sickened by the disease. The state requested the assessment following revelations about inmate deaths from Valley Fever.

The Associated Press (AP) reported that the institute confirmed 65 Valley fever cases among PVSP staff between 2009 and mid-2013 and that two employees died. While the general rate of Valley Fever infection in Fresno County is 40 cases per 100,000 people, the rate among PVSP employees was 1,039 cases per 100,000 non-inmate adults, the institute concluded. It also warned "that there can be no direct comparison because of differences in the populations and the reporting of the illness."

The AP added, "Researchers couldn't determine if the prison employees contracted the disease at work or outside of work, and said most were likely exposed to the fungus on and off the job."

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended that skin tests could identify inmates already exposed to Valley Fever and therefore immune to another infection, allowing them to be housed at PVSP.

### **Medical programs**

PVSP inaugurated a substance abuse program in July to help inmates dealing with drug and alcohol dependency. By the time of the Grand Jury's visit, 120 inmates were participating in the program.

Inmate health, vision, pharmacy and dental needs are met in a separate facility at PVSP, which also has beds for 15 men, who need assisted medical care. The medical and correctional staff works to keep conflicts to a minimum.

The prison offers mental health treatment at the Coalinga State Hospital, immediately east of PVSP, in a dedicated unit for which the prison provides security staff.

### **Kitchen operation**

Staff and inmates work together in the PVSP kitchen to produce more than 9,000 meals per day – two hot and one cold – for each inmate. Nutritionists help ensure all meals are healthful. Inmates can request kosher and vegetarian meals in place of the standard fare.

Experienced institutional chefs and inmates work a day or two ahead of delivery preparing hot meals that can be flash-frozen for reheating after being transported from the main kitchen to satellite warming facilities at housing units. Sack lunches are distributed with the morning meal to be eaten at the inmate's discretion between the hot breakfast and supper.

Kitchen staff and security staff clearly enjoy their part in kitchen operation. Working in the kitchen helps inmates to hone skills that could lead to careers after leaving prison.

To ensure safety, staff members sample inmate food before it is provided. A tray or sack for each meal is randomly selected and maintained frozen for 72 hours. If an inmate believes he suffered a food-borne illness, the control meal is tested.

PVSP spends nearly \$4 million each year on food for inmates. The prison does not grow food or buy food significantly from local sources.

### **Solar power and drought response**

To help reduce its \$288,512 monthly utility bill, PVSP completed installation of solar panels that provide electricity to the prison and adjacent Coalinga State Hospital. The panels became operational in September 2014.

The PVSP solar farm provides 3.22 megawatts of generating capacity, more than enough to supply electricity to 3,000 houses. PVSP anticipates solar power will generate about 24 percent of the prison's total electricity needs.

In the 12 prisons where solar panels have been installed, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation estimates energy cost savings of \$78 million over 20 years.

PVSP's solar panel farm also is part of the department's Going Green initiative and is estimated to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by more than 61,000 metric tons.

As part of the state government response to California's drought, prisons were asked to reduce water use by 20 percent. PVSP has reduced or eliminated some landscape irrigation.

### **Prison security**

During the tour, the Grand Jury was informed that there were several positions vacant. There were assurances, though, that the vacancies did not compromise prison security.

Staff said that stern measures help prevent the flow of drugs to inmates, but a new kind of contraband is of concern. PVSP and other prisons are taking action to help keep cellphones from being smuggled into the prison for inmates. The phones can connect inmates to criminal

enterprises outside prison, PVSP officials said, and have high dollar value. PVSP took punitive action against a staff member recently for selling phones to inmates.

To prevent escapes, there are at least five counts daily, with others as situations dictate. PVSP says each count takes about 30 minutes.

To minimize conflicts, especially among gang members, a rigorous classification process is initiated when an inmate arrives at the prison. Inmates are assigned to housing units based on the intake evaluation. Changes in classification are updated based on inmate behavior. Inmates trying to break away from gang affiliations and some other prisoners with special needs are assigned to appropriate housing. The Grand Jury also witnessed protocols in the PVSP medical facility implemented to prevent inmate conflict.

## CONCLUSIONS

Pleasant Valley State Prison (PVSP) – during the Grand Jury’s limited visit – appeared to be a well-run correctional facility working to rehabilitate and educate inmates so they will be qualified to become productive members of their communities. Physical and mental health facilities are in place for inmates, but PVSP must remain vigilant in preventing Valley Fever among the inmate and employee populations. A new reward system promotes positive behavior with defined incentives for inmates. PVSP participates in the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation’s Go Green initiative, most recently installing solar panels to generate electricity.

## FINDINGS

- F101** - As Pleasant Valley State Prison’s (PVSP) inmate population declines, crowding issues detailed in previous Grand Jury reports appear to be diminishing.
- F102** - With the transfer of at-risk inmates to other prisons, PVSP’s Valley Fever threat is lessened. However, recent reports about Valley Fever among employees raise concern.
- F103** - A dedicated area at Coalinga State Hospital was established for PVSP inmates for mental-health treatment, as recommended in previous Grand Jury reports.
- F104** - Vocational and academic programs seem to be growing in scope, variety and inmate participation and are regularly evaluated for relevance.
- F105** - A reward system has been installed to reinforce good behavior by inmates.
- F106** - A solar panel array helps generate a significant part of prison's power, reducing carbon dioxide emissions and the electricity bill, while decreased landscape irrigation is a response to the state’s drought.
- F107** - Strict rules/counts/procedures are in place to help prevent drugs and cell phones getting to inmates and to keep inmates from escaping.
- F108** - While classification procedures, housing assignments and other measures promote inmate safety, diminished staffing could lead to security challenges in an emergency.
- F109** - The kitchen serves multiple purposes in PSVP operations, health and nutrition and career training and could be a catalyst for using more locally-sourced or prison-grown food.
- F110** - Inmates appear to get good health care.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2014-15 Grand Jury recommends Pleasant Valley State Prison implement the following:

- R101** - Continue to reduce the inmate population. (F101)
- R102** - Add programs that will help educate and train inmates for better opportunities upon release and reduce recidivism, helping promote safer communities. (F104)
- R103** - Assess the Enhanced Program Facility initiative to determine how it can be broadened. (F105)
- R104** - Continue and improve physical and mental health programs and facilities for inmates. (F103 and F110)
- R105** - Be certain employees and inmates are tested adequately for Valley Fever. (F102)
- R106** - Find new opportunities to participate in Go Green programs. (F106)
- R107** - Continue and improve inmate procedure classification procedures to ensure safety and keep conflicts to a minimum. (108)
- R108** - Find ways to keep staffing at full complement. (F108)
- R109** - Continue kitchen operations and look for new opportunities to buy food locally or raise food on prison property. (F109)

## REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code 933(c) and 933.05, the Fresno County Grand Jury requests responses to each of the specific findings and recommendations. It is required that responses from elected officials are due within 60 days of the receipt of this report and 90 days for others.

## RESPONDENTS

Scott Frauenheim, Warden, Pleasant Valley State Prison (Findings 101-110 and Recommendations 101-109)

Jeffrey A. Beard, Ph.D., Secretary, California Corrections and Rehabilitation (Findings 101, 102, 104, 105, 106, 108 and 109 and Recommendations 101-106 and 108)

## SOURCES AND REFERENCES

Interviews with warden and staff

Fact Sheet provided by Pleasant Valley State Prison

Pleasant Valley State Prison and California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation websites

2007-8, 2011-12 and 2012-13 Fresno County Grand Jury reports

Associated Press article on Valley Fever: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/02/06/3753978/study-valley-fever-killed-3-prison.html>

Associated Press article on prison employees: <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2014/07/28/feds-recommend-california-test-inmates-for-valley-fever-prison-avenal-pleasant-valley/>