

OCO Inspection of Northern State Prison

March 22, 2022 - Housing Unit Echo 1 East (E1E)

Conducted by: Assistant Ombudspersons Melissa Matthews, Kristin King & Megan Farrell

INTRODUCTION

On March 22, 2022 the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson (OCO) conducted an inspection of housing unit Echo 1 East (E1E) at Northern State Prison. Northern State Prison is located in Newark, New Jersey and is one of the largest Correctional facilities in the State of New Jersey. The Department of Corrections lists the institution's actual population as 1,808 as of January 12, 2021, according to its website (www.state.nj.us/corrections). The institution consists of both general population and restorative housing units. The unit inspected, E1E, is a general population housing unit with a subsection of a Limited Privilege Unit. The housing unit has a capacity of 80 individuals. The unit is two levels with an upstairs and downstairs. On the day of the inspection the actual population of the unit was 69. It should be noted, each cell is considered a double cell which means two persons are assigned to one room. One cell was sealed due to an active investigation by the Special Investigation Unit. The weather was pleasant with a report of 59 degrees Fahrenheit as the high and no precipitation.

The inspection was conducted by two Assistant Ombudspersons with additional aid provided by the Assistant Ombudsperson assigned to the institution. There were 5 main areas of focus: living quarters, communications, recreation, food services, and programming. The inspection consisted of data collection, observation, and interviews of both the staff and the incarcerated persons. The OCO interviewed all available incarcerated persons to ensure they were in possession of appropriate bedding and inquire of any maintenance issues within their living quarters. The Assistant Ombudspersons completed a more in-depth interview with a sampling of the population to gauge unit concerns and provide a different perspective from staff responses.

SECTION I: LIVING QUARTERS

Observations

The inspection began at 7:40am. Walking through the facility, the Assistant Ombudspersons found it to be orderly and smelled of cleaner. The outside grounds had no greenery, but were well-kept with no litter or other debris. Upon entry into the housing unit, the OCO took immediate notice of its cleanliness. No trash, discarded items or signs of rodents or insects were observed. The unit temperature was cool at 67 degrees Fahrenheit in the common area. Temperatures in the cells were slightly warmer. The thermometer reading was 69 degrees Fahrenheit in both downstairs and upstairs cells that were checked. The cells consist of bunk

beds, a sink, toilet (see Photos 1, 2 & 3 in the Appendix), desk, and shelf. The cells viewed showed discoloration and possible rust in some areas on the walls and near the cell doors.

The housing unit officer provided a tour of the supply closets, which are used to hold the unit's cleaning supplies. While the supplies appeared to be limited, the OCO has not received any complaints that requests for cleaning supplies are unable to be filled. Both staff and the incarcerated persons informed the OCO that cleaning supplies are readily available. The unit officer advised the OCO that common areas are cleaned at a minimum of twice a day. The OCO did observe the tables in the passive recreation being cleaned and wiped down. The unit is well lit and required no replacement light bulbs or fixtures. The Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) posters, which include information on how to contact agencies for help, were hung in view for all incarcerated persons to utilize. Fire sprinkler heads appeared free of debris. Unfortunately, the OCO found both fire extinguishers for the housing unit to be outdated with inspection tags dated 2020. This office was advised by a custody supervisor that there is a backlog with the extinguishers. Cameras were visible throughout the unit and custody staff were viewed wearing body cameras. All staff and incarcerated persons were abiding by the DOC mask mandate. It should be noted that towards the end of the inspection, during distribution of meals, a small number of incarcerated persons were viewed not wearing a masks in the common area, nor in the presence of the OCO; where they were reminded to do so.

The Assistant Ombudspersons toured the unit ensuring to stop at each cell to communicate with the population. The OCO found four persons without pillows which was immediately remedied by Custody staff. The institutional blankets were thin and are not believed to provide much warmth. There were also maintenance concerns which ranged from a clogged sink to a possible short in a power outlet. Another complaint received was for the discoloration in the cells which the incarcerated person believed to be rust. These issues were provided to the institution's Associate Administrator and Security Major.

E1E consists of three showers, one on the first floor and two on the second, all found to be in working order. The first floor showers had handrails for those in need. While the showers were observed to be mostly clean, all were found to have missing tiles on the floor and walls. Discoloration was found in the grout that appeared to be black in color, possibly mildew (see Photos 4-9). Information provided indicates there is no set schedule for showers; however, custody staff informed the OCO that the incarcerated persons are provided the opportunity to shower three times a day during their recreation period. They are also offered showers after active recreation or certain job details. As such, information provided by custody staff was found to be consistent with the interviews conducted by the OCO of the population with only a few incarcerated individuals disputing this report.

Recommendations

- Thorough cleaning and application of fresh paint in the incarcerated persons' cells.

- The OCO strongly recommends the re-inspection or replacement of fire extinguishers that are out of date.
- While the mask mandate was appropriately adhered to the majority of the time, the OCO suggests the staff and population be reminded when necessary. For repeat offenders, the appropriate disciplinary process should be followed.
- The OCO suggests a higher quality or additional blankets be provided during the winter months.
- Unit showers require replacement of tiles and a deep cleaning.

SECTION II: COMMUNICATIONS

Observations

Incarcerated persons are afforded three methods to communicate with their loved ones: by telephone, JPay email and postal mail. E1E consists of six working telephones split equally between both floors. A mailbox is located in the main entrance for stamped letters. JPay kiosks provide individuals with access to email as well as to the DOC remedy system, Inmate Handbook and educational services. Unfortunately, the unit only has one JPay kiosk with no set schedule for its use. Interviews with the population revealed the desire for another JPAY kiosk; however, only a few concerns were mentioned to the Assistant Ombudspersons about the time permitted to utilize the machine. This does not seem reasonable as the unit has 69 individuals who must divide three hours daily for its use. Therefore, it is believed by the OCO that some of the population may have trouble accessing it.

The OCO reviewed the institutional forms which allow the incarcerated persons to request assistance, sign up for programs, grieve concerns, etc. All forms were available on the unit via the incarcerated person tier representative. In order to obtain a form, the incarcerated person must request it from the tier representative. Mailboxes for the desired departments were observed outside of the unit. Upon inquiry, both custody and most, but not all incarcerated persons, advised that they are allowed to go to the mailboxes to distribute their forms upon request.

Recommendations

- The OCO does not believe one kiosk is adequate to allow each person time on the kiosk and strongly recommends an additional kiosk be added to the unit. This recommendation will hold true for the entire facility
- Additional telephones are also recommended, especially with the limited recreation groups and restricted visitation due to COVID mitigation tactics, which will allow individuals additional time to speak with loved ones.
- It is recommended that cabinets or cubbies be setup in the common area to allow individuals to retrieve forms, including the OCO Request for Assistance Form, without

having to request the documents from another incarcerated person. Maintenance staff showed OCO the prototype of the cubbies designed to hold the forms and indicated it would be available for installation immediately.

- The OCO has not received any complaints about the mailboxes, but suggests making them more accessible which will provide anonymity in the best interest of the population.

SECTION III: RECREATION

Observations

The schedules for both passive and active recreation are posted near the officer's station on the unit. Passive recreation is 1 ½ hours, three times a day. The OCO was advised, due to Covid mitigation strategies, the number of persons allowed to participate in passive (or indoor) recreation was reduced to allow social distancing. Therefore, the 1 ½ hours is split to 45 minutes three times a day. During this time the incarcerated person is permitted to subject to availability, shower, utilize the JPay kiosk and/or telephone or use the day space to socialize (see Photo 10). The institution does not provide any activities such as checkers or board games; however, they do allow the incarcerated persons to buy their own. Additionally, there is one television in the common area. The television was not on at the time of the observed recreation, but upon request by the Ombudspersons, the television was put on and found to be in working order.

Outdoor recreation is scheduled on a rotating basis as well, with the population being offered outside recreation once a day and twice a day on the fourth scheduled day. Outdoor recreation and passive recreation may be scheduled at the same time. In that circumstance, the person would have to choose which they prefer. The outside recreation area features pull up and dip bars, basketball hoop, wall ball and picnic tables (see Photos 11 & 12). While the outside space provided was adequate in size, the institution provided no alternative in the event of inclement weather.

Recommendations

- With proper guidance provided by the Health Services Unit, increase the number of persons in each indoor recreation group or increase the length of indoor recreation to allow individuals extended access to the shower, kiosk, telephones, and congregate time.
- The facility provide an alternative active recreation space during inclement weather so the recreation time is not canceled.

SECTION IV: FOOD SERVICE

Observations

The OCO observed the lunch mess which takes place on the housing unit. The food was delivered at 12:15pm. Incarcerated persons working in Food Service prepared the food trays for distribution on the unit. They were observed wearing hairnets, gloves, and masks. At approximately 12:27pm the first set of individuals were called to retrieve their food. Lunch consisted of turkey lunch meat, 3 bean salad (2 types of green beans and kidney beans), shredded cheese, lettuce, apples, wheat bread, mustard and lemonade (See Photo 13). The meal was pleasing to the eye and served at the appropriate temperature. The turkey lunch meat looked appealing and tasted fresh. The green bean salad was tart, but pleasing to the taste. Pepper Jack cheese was served. It was spicy and was a compliment to the turkey. The bread was not soft, but was free of mold and edible. The OCO retrieved our tray last and requested a smaller portion to ensure the food service workers received lunch. The juice is made available from a beverage dispenser. When dispensing the beverage the Assistant Ombudsperson observed an unknown dark piece of debris poured into the cup. (See Photo 14). Unfortunately, the apples had run out on the last quarter of distribution to the housing unit. It appears to be a theme, as it was told to the OCO by the population that it is not uncommon for the fruits, specifically oranges and apples, to run out. The other food appeared to be plentiful; however, a sampling of incarcerated persons advised that this was not normally the case. This could be caused by over serving by the food workers or it may be the food portion provided by Food Service is not adequate to feed the entire unit. Therefore, those who are called out towards the end may not get the meal in its entirety. To remedy this the housing unit officer rotates the order of lunch mess. Therefore, the same individuals are not consistently missing portions of their meals. It would appear that food services staff overcompensated on the day of the inspection as they were aware of our visit.

In an effort to determine if a shortage of food is an ongoing problem, the Assistant Ombudsperson assigned to NSP will monitor future meals being served. In this vein, the Assistant Ombudsperson assigned to Northern State Prison observed an additional lunch meal the day after the inspection. She found the food service workers were serving the meal with their gloved hands due to lack of utensils. Additionally, when the OCO requested the menu at the time of the inspection, the one provided was outdated. This was supposed to be remedied the next day; however, the Assistant Ombudsperson advised that this was not done. Going forward, she will look for menus to be posted and will observe to determine if adequate portions are being provided. Any issues will be reported to the NSP Administration.

Recommendations

- The OCO urges the facility to supply adequate food portions to the population.
- The Food Services Department shall afford the necessary serving utensils to the line workers to ensure hygienic serving of the meals.
- The monthly menu be posted on the housing unit for the incarcerated persons to view.

SECTION V: PROGRAMMING

Observations

The commissary schedule was not posted on the tier, but was available upon request by the OCO. The commissary schedule is also on a rotating schedule. E1E receives their commissary orders twice a month. Unfortunately, similar issues that are impacting the community outside the walls are affecting the commissary orders as well. Many items are found to be out of stock or delayed. The rotating schedule attempts to provide some relief to this issue by changing which units receive their order first, thereby giving them a better chance of their items being in stock.

During the inspection, the Assistant Ombudspersons toured the educational area to view what services are offered and observe classes. The OCO was advised that there are twelve educational programs that are offered to the population at Northern State Prison. Some of the courses are NJ STEP, a college program for interested persons to earn an associate or bachelor's degree, Traffic Control & Flagging, High School Equivalency courses and Electrical Trades. The OCO observed the classrooms to be well sized and it appeared as though the participants were well immersed in their learning. The OCO also viewed the expansive law library which housed shelves filled with books, green plants that colored the room, computers and a JPAY kiosk. According to an incarcerated person who works in the library, the kiosk is available for those who are approved to visit the law library. A sign-up sheet dictates the order and maintains a schedule for the kiosk. The classrooms and law library appeared to be clean, bright and in good condition.

Northern State Prison offers 6 additional groups through the Office of Transitional Services. One example of these groups is STARS (Successful Transition and Reentry Program), which aims to assist individuals with their transition back into the society. Other programs are directed to individuals who may have extended or short sentences of incarceration to work on their behavior. These include the anger management program, Cage Your Rage, and Thinking for a Change, a cognitive change program which works on controlling a person's thoughts and actions. During the interviews with the sample population, the OCO received mixed responses that varied from persons being on the wait list to those who do not wish to be active in either. The Administration at Northern State Prison was able to provide the OCO with waiting list numbers and the number of participants in the Social Services programs. The OCO did inquire about the group cycles and waiting lists. The office was informed that Social Services programs are currently being reduced due to Covid mitigation tactics to a 50% capacity by the Office of Transitional Services. While this may be necessary to reduce the risk of COVID, the OCO is hopeful the restrictions will be reduced or eliminated in the near future to allow more individuals to take advantage of the resources provided to them by the Department of Corrections.

Recommendations

- The OCO suggests the facility explore alternate avenues to purchase popular items, such as water, that does not violate the contract.
- With the appropriate guidance from the Health Services Unit, it is recommended for an increase in the number of group participants or an addition of groups to allow more individuals to participate in programs and classes.

CONCLUSION

The physical inspection concluded at 1:10pm. Topics were discussed in further detail with a sampling of the unit's population. In these discussions the OCO found most individuals were made aware of the facility's rules through a handbook which is provided in hardcopy as well as on JPay. Those asked found it easy to understand. Also, the majority of those interviewed indicated that they knew they could notify the housing officer if their cell was in need of maintenance or if they needed bedding. Yet these issues were still found during the inspection.

Overall, the staff at Northern State Prison were welcoming and respectful to all involved in the inspection. The incarcerated persons were respectful and appeared to be appreciative of the interest to share in their experience. In summary, the Office of the Ombudsperson recommends the addition of at least one JPay kiosk and additional telephones to allow more access for the population. While the meal was overall pleasing on the day of the inspection, due to the concerns noted by the incarcerated persons and in the following days by the Assistant Ombudsperson, the office recommends greater attention to the preparation of food service on the tier to include quantity, cleaning of dispensers and appropriate utensils. There should not be any instances where the correct amount of food is not provided, especially given the significant reductions in the population of the NJDOC over the last year. The physical unit and facility were clean, but would benefit from fresh paint and regular maintenance. The OCO also stresses the importance of fire safety and strongly urge the outdated fire extinguishers to be re-inspected or replaced.

APPENDIX

Photo #1 Sink in cell

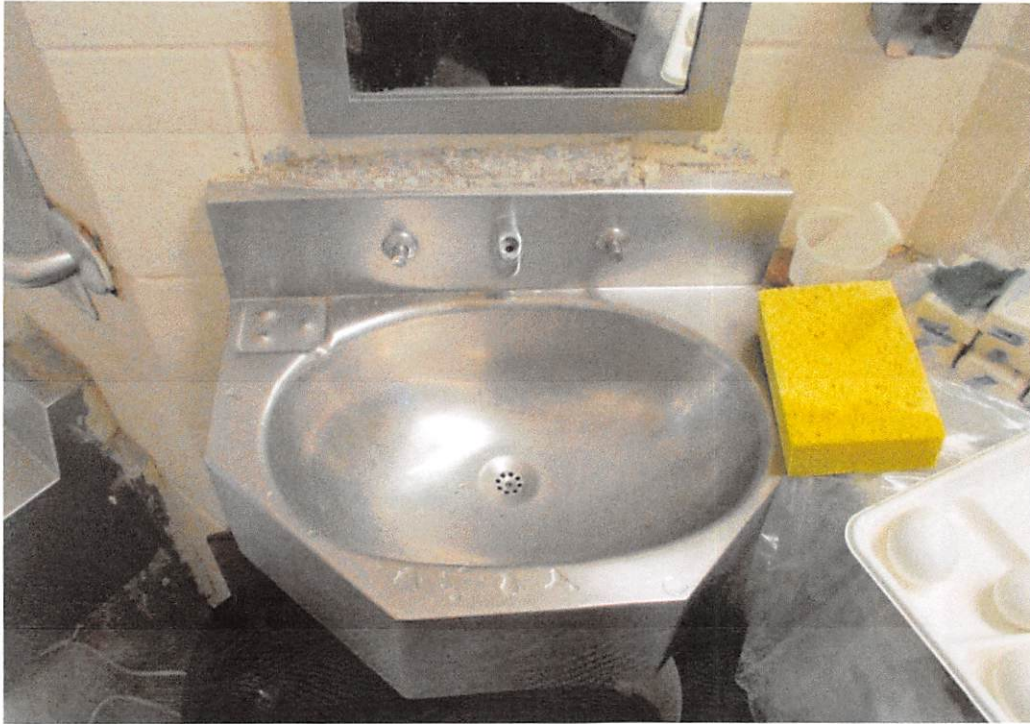


Photo #2 Toilet in cell

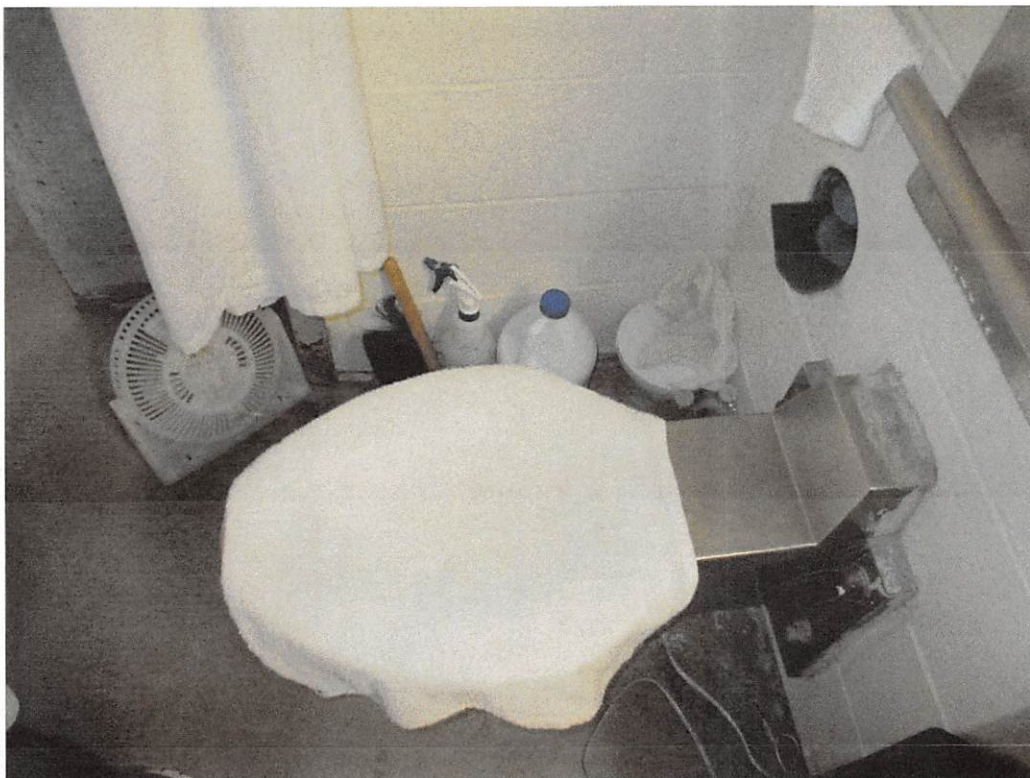


Photo #3 Sink/Toilet in cell

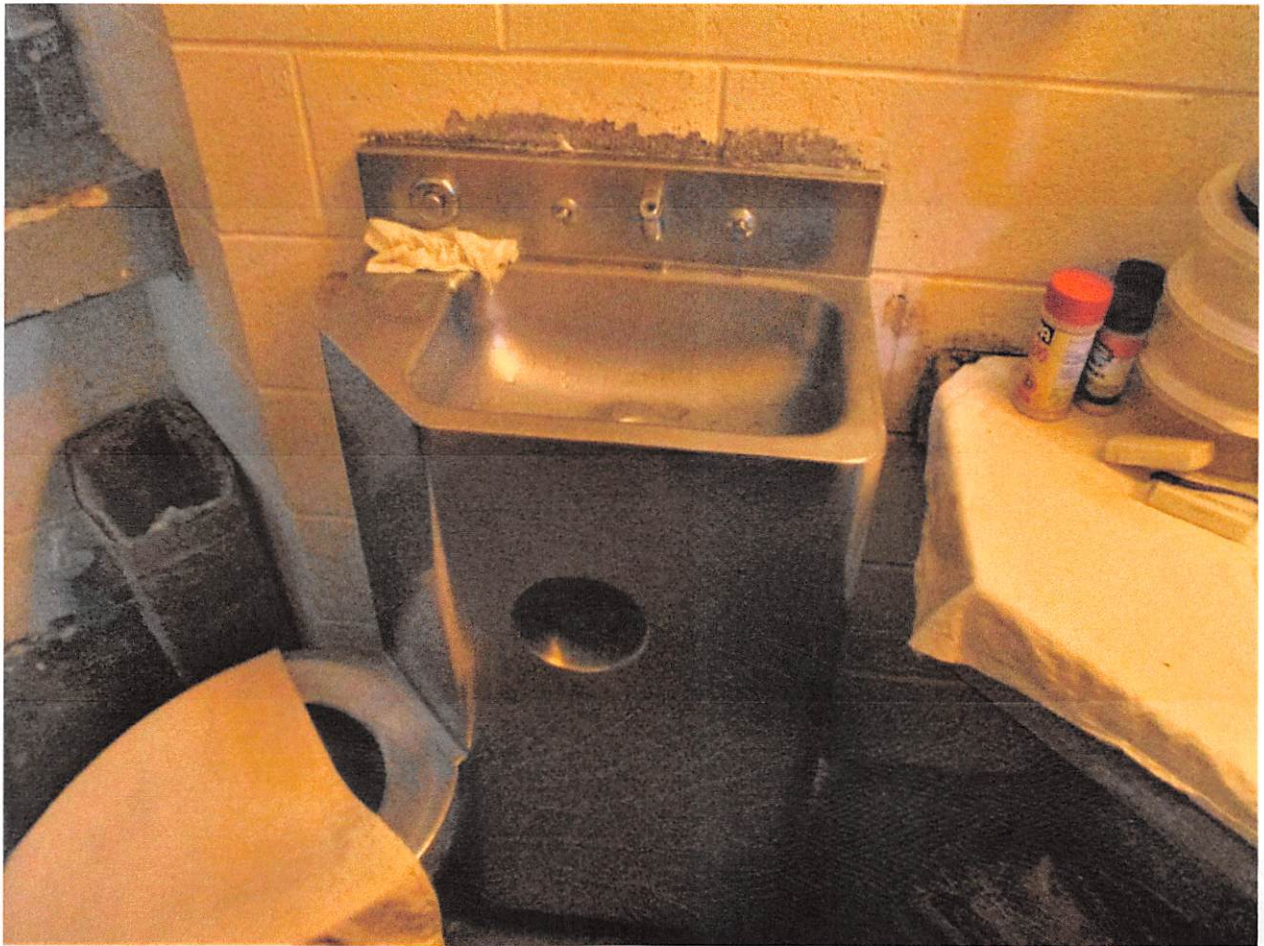


Photo #4 Shower

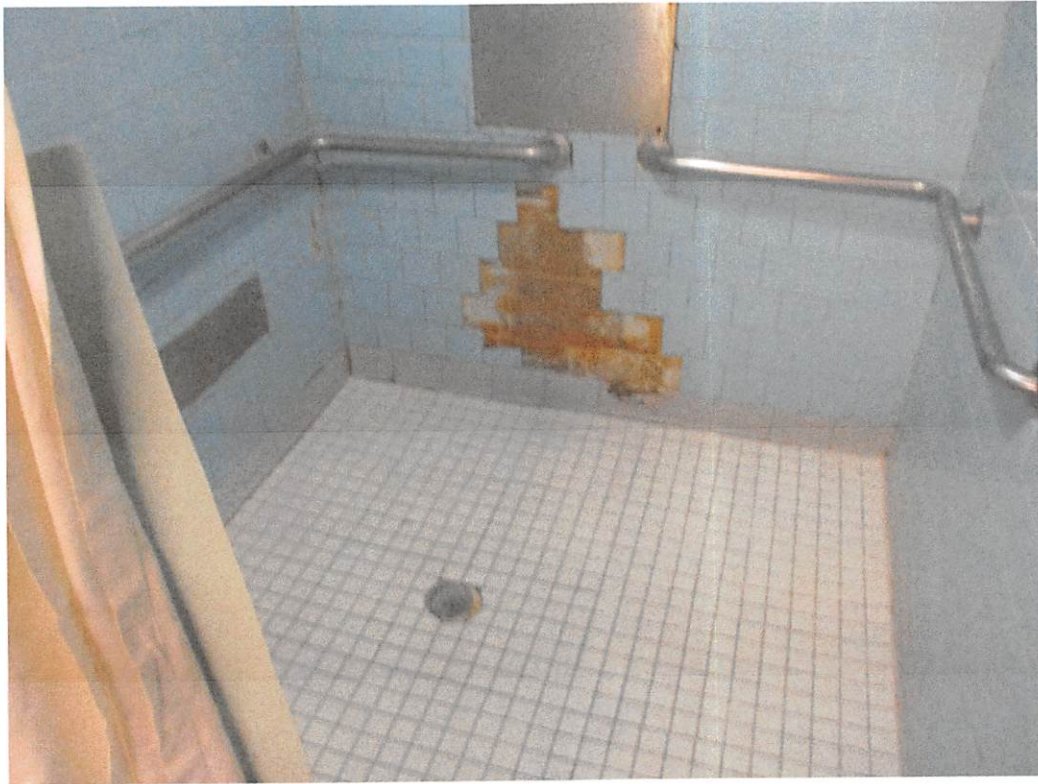


Photo #5 Shower

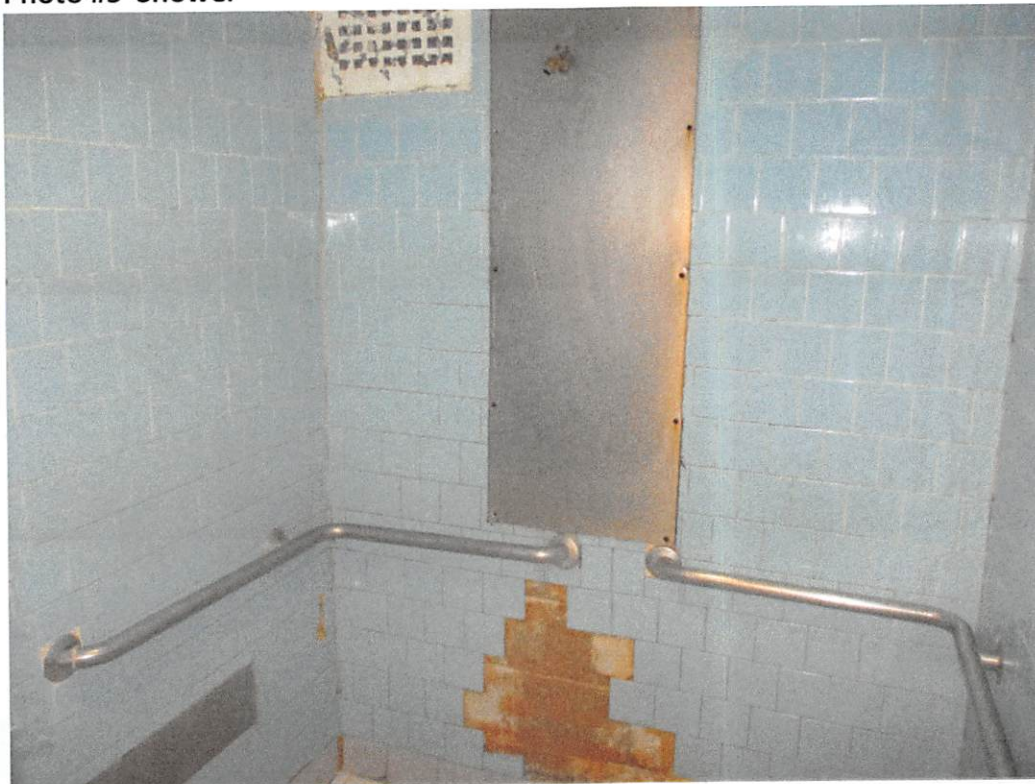


Photo #6 Shower



Photo #7 Shower



Photo #8 Shower



Photo #9 Shower



Photo #10 Dayspace



Photo #11 Table in outside recreation yard



Photo #12 Outdoor Recreation Yard



Photo #13 Lunch meal



Photo #14 Lunch beverage with unidentified floating debris



This report was forwarded to the Administration at Northern State Prison on March 29, 2022 for their review and feedback. The final response posted below, was received on April 7, 2022. The OCO will continue view closely in critical appraisal the major areas of concern to include the fire extinguishers and food portions, while simultaneously monitoring the progress of the restoration of the unit cells and showers.



State of New Jersey
DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS
WHITTLESEY ROAD
PO Box 863
TRENTON NJ 08625-0863

PHILIP D. MURPHY
Governor

SHEILA Y. OLIVER
Lt. Governor

VICTORIA L. KUHN, ESQ.
Acting Commissioner

MEMORANDUM

TO: Kristin King, Assistant Ombudsperson
Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson

FROM: Patricia McGill, Administrator *pmc*
Northern State Prison

DATE: March 31, 2022

SUBJECT: **Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson Inspection Response**

On March 22, 2022, the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson conducted an unannounced inspection in accordance with A3979 at Northern State Prison (NSP). The inspection was conducted by Assistant Ombudspersons Kristin King, Melissa Matthews and Megan Farrell. Echo 1 East (E1E), a general population housing unit with a subsection designated as the Limited Privilege Unit, was inspected and a report of the findings was provided. Upon receipt, said report was reviewed and all noted discrepancies were remedied. Please see detailed information noted below:

As per Recommendations made by the Assistant Ombudspersons:

SECTION I: LIVING QUARTERS

"Thorough cleaning and application of fresh paint in the incarcerated persons' cells."

- Cleaning supplies are made readily available on the housing unit. Monthly schedule for paint detail will be established to provide a fresh paint job to housing units and IP cells as needed.

"The OCO strongly recommends the re-inspection or replacement of fire extinguishers that are out of date."

- The institutional fire marshal had already scheduled the fire extinguisher inspections for March 30, 31 and April 1. As of today's date the inspections are occurring and will be completed by April 1.

"The OCO suggests a higher quality or additional blankets be provided during the winter months."

- Blankets are provided through DEPTCOR and the quality of blanket is consistent throughout the state. However, additional blankets will be made available to the population upon request.

"Unit showers require replacement of tiles and a deep cleaning."

- Maintenance has been made aware of the missing tiles through the work order system and the inmate porters are provided with cleaning supplies to include bleach.

SECTION II: COMMUNICATIONS

"The OCO does not believe one kiosk is adequate to allow each person time on the kiosk and strongly recommends an additional kiosk be added to the unit. This recommendation will hold true for the entire facility."

- The current Administration is in agreement. On 3/23/2022 JPAY conducted a walk through for the purpose of adding additional kiosks to all housing units. Upon completion it was determined that (2) additional kiosks will be added to each housing unit.

"It is recommended that cabinets or cubbies be setup in the common area to allow individuals to retrieve forms, including the OCO Request for Assistance Form, without having to request the documents from another incarcerated person. Maintenance staff showed OCO the prototype of the cubbies designed to hold the forms and indicated it would be available for installation immediately."

- Mountable filing cabinets have been procured. Maintenance is currently installing.

SECTION III: RECREATION

"With proper guidance provided by the Health Services Unit, increase the number of persons in each indoor recreation group or increase the length of indoor recreation to allow individuals extended access to the shower, kiosk, telephones, and congregate time."

- In an effort to ensure adequate social distancing, every indoor recreation group consists of 50% (20 cells / 40 inmates) of the housing unit. With appropriate guidance from the CDC and HSU the number of persons will be increased gradually.

"The facility provide an alternative active recreation space during inclement weather so the recreation time is not canceled."

- Presently there are no accommodations in place that provides an alternative for active recreation during inclement weather. Reason being – visits are 6 days a week and the gym are is used for this purpose.

SECTION IV: FOOD SERVICE

“The OCO urges the facility to supply adequate food portions to the population.”

- Moving forward we will ensure that an adequate supply of food is delivered to each housing unit. In addition, I am in agreement with the OCO’s assessment which states that the inadequate supply could have been caused by the over serving of food by the food-service workers. As a result, food-service workers will be instructed to provide proper portions to each inmate.

“The Food Services Department shall afford the necessary serving utensils to the line workers to ensure hygienic serving of the meals”

- There are designated serving utensils for every unit which will be provided to each unit in plastic container at the onset of breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

“The monthly menu be posted on the housing unit for the incarcerated persons to view.”

- Updated menus have been posted to each unit.

SUMMARY

NSP’s Administration and Custody staff are appreciative of the assistance offered through the Office of the Corrections Ombudsperson. Together, we have a shared interest in ensuring that the missions, goals, and objectives of the New Jersey Department of Corrections are met.

From a facility standpoint, we commit to managing the inmates assigned to Northern State Prison with honesty and integrity. In addition, we shall serve as a positive example and demonstrate the highest ethical and professional standards in all our operations while remaining accountable to the public.

To aid in accomplishing this mission, we intend to:

- Remain pro-active in our efforts in the management of all incarcerated persons;
- Ensure humane and appropriate treatment of all incarcerated persons;
- Provide adequate and appropriate services and programs to address the assessed needs of all incarcerated persons;
- Facilitate the successful reintegration of all incarcerated persons into society using best-practice approaches.