

What Happens When a Person is Incarcerated in a State Prison?

By Hallie Martyniuk



When an inmate enters into the DOC, the diagnostic and classification process begins. This means that the inmate is screened for mental, physical, and emotional problems so that he/she can receive a correctional plan. It also shows the inmate's strengths, such as his/her education, skills, and emotional stability. A female inmate entering into the Department will go through SCI Muncy. A male inmate coming into the Department will go through the SCI Graterford, Pittsburgh, or Camp Hill; however, every man is classified at the Diagnostic and Classification Center in Camp Hill. The whole diagnostic and classification process takes a minimum of four to six weeks, but can take as long as nine months. A newly committed inmate is separated from the general population inmates during this time.

WHEN AN INMATE FIRST ARRIVES INTO THE DIAGNOSTIC AND CLASSIFICATION CENTER, THE RECEPTION STAFF DOES THE FOLLOWING:

- Looks over the identification of the new inmate
- Makes sure all the paperwork is in order
- Calculates what the inmate's sentence should be, based on the length of the sentence, how much time the inmate has already served, and other factors

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It is important to note that the corrections counselor is very different from a counselor/advocate in a community-based program. A corrections counselor works with the inmate, setting up and managing his/her programming, alerting the inmate to changes in schedules, cell mates, or units and making sure all paperwork is correct. The corrections counselor is not concerned with the inmate's emotional needs.

The inmate is searched to make sure no contraband is being brought into the facility. He/she is photographed and fingerprinted. The inmate will also receive special clothing that identifies he/she from the general population.

The inmate is then assigned a corrections counselor. It is important to note that the corrections counselor is very different from a counselor/advocate in a community-based program. A corrections counselor works with the inmate, setting up and managing his/her programming, alerting the inmate to changes in schedules, cell mates, or units and making sure all paperwork is correct. The corrections counselor is not concerned with the inmate's emotional needs. The inmate is given his/her first cell assignment and provided a copy of the Inmate Handbook, which explains the rules about inmate behavior, inmate grooming, telephone calls, and religious programs (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, 2009)

Many tests are performed before putting the inmate into general population. They receive a medical screening which includes an examination for mental illness and rules out medical problems such as tuberculosis. Tests are administered to identify the inmates I.Q. and educational level. New inmates are also screened for drug/alcohol addictions. The inmate is interviewed by treatment professionals including corrections counselors, psychologists, drug and alcohol treatment specialists, chaplains, educators, and medical staff to help decide what treatment or education the inmate needs and how closely he/she needs to be supervised. An inmate covered by the DNA Detection of Sexual and Violent Offenders Act are required to have a blood sample taken, which is sent to the Pennsylvania State Police (PSP)¹.



CLASSIFICATION AND CUSTODY LEVEL

After all the tests and interviews are completed, the inmate is assigned a custody level. The custody level determines the amount of security needed to manage the inmate. The Pennsylvania Additive Classification Tool (PACT) is utilized for this assessment. The PACT is a series of questions which identifies the recommended custody level. The inmate may be assigned a custody level of 2, 3, or 4.

- Custody level 2 = a minimum security facility
- Custody level 3 = medium security
- Custody level 4 = close security


There are special situations where an inmate may need less security or much more security than is available in these three levels. Custody level 1 is only used for an inmate being placed into a Community Corrections Center. Custody level 5 is used for an inmate who needs maximum security and is placed in the Restricted Housing Unit (RHU), Special Management Unit (SMU), and Long-Term Segregation Unit (LTSU).

SPECIALIZED CORRECTIONAL PROGRAMS

SPECIAL MANAGEMENT UNIT PROGRAM
These department programs have been established for the handling of disruptive and/or violent inmates whose presence represents a risk to the well-being of other inmates and staff. His/her program is specifically designed to progress through specific phases based upon his/her behavior and ability to adjust under reduced levels of supervision.

Each phase offers progressively more privileges and services until it is determined that the inmate can again achieve general population status at a designated facility.

SPECIAL NEEDS UNITS (SNU)
These department units were established to provide a safe and secure setting, along with specialized treatment services for an inmate identified as being unable to function in a general population housing unit. An inmate in this category may include someone diagnosed as mentally ill, emotionally unstable, mentally retarded and physically or developmentally challenged. Placement does not require the mental health commitment process.

MENTAL HEALTH UNITS
These departmental units are certified mental health units housed within a correctional facility. They are operated by vendors under contract to the Department of Corrections. They are licensed and monitored by the Department of Public Welfare. 

REFERENCE

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. (2009). *Inmate handbook*. Available at http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=space&name=Dir&psname=SearchResult&psid=0&cached=true&in_hi_userid=2&control=OpenSubFolder&subfolderID=155904&DirMode=1

ENDNOTES

1 If the inmate committed a sexual or violent crime, they will have blood drawn for DNA purposes—to be entered into the National Crime Intervention Center (NCIC)

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