

Prison in Cayman no holiday

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Being incarcerated in the Cayman Islands prison system is not pleasant.

Since its beginning in 1975, prison in Cayman and in particular Her Majesty's Prison Northward has - to a large extent - been shrouded in mystery in the minds of most people in the Cayman Islands, who only here tales of retreats akin to an imaginary Hotel California where the amenities of freedom abound.

Cayman's prison system consists of Northward Prison for adult males, Fairbanks Prison for women inmates and Eagle House for juveniles.

Before the development of the Northward Prison facility inmates served their time in Jamaica.

It is true that work is optional and inmates can watch television and use a pay phone at certain times at Northward, but upon entering the facility's wings and units, one quickly realises this is no consolation for having absolutely no independence, being surrounded by criminals, having no privacy, using a public bathroom and eating and drinking as well as bathing when you are told.

One visit to the maximum security/high risk unit will immediately lead one to realise that prison in the Cayman Islands is no holiday. The men in this wing of the prison are allowed to leave their cells for only one hour per day and according to prison officers on shift at the unit, it can be a logistics nightmare, with feuding factions and rivals all living so close to each other. This has been a real challenge and things can devolve quite quickly to behaviour as savage as tossing faeces and urine across the isle at a rival.

Mr. Greaves said this is usually dealt with by constantly being vigilant, walking around the prison and talking to the inmates.

"You have to keep your finger on the pulse of the prison and get to things early, before they have a chance of escalating," he said. "Prison life in Cayman is no joke and it is important to let the reality of the setting be seen, as a means of deterring those who may be thinking otherwise."

There is a loss of dignity that can prevail in such an environment. It is out of this punishment that one must muster the resolve to never

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sink to such levels again; or at least, that is the hope.

The Cayman Islands has a recidivism rate of 63 per cent, according to prison officials who explained that the number is higher than many other jurisdictions because of the method of assessment used in Cayman. If assessed using more widely accepted and less rigid criteria, the number would be considerably lower.

"Recidivism is usually measured over a three to five year period and categorised by a particular offence but in Cayman we say if you come back to prison, even for a different crime, we count that as recidivism. It probably means that our numbers are higher than areas where other methodology is used but for all practical purposes, if the person is coming back to prison, we see that as recidivism," explained Prison Director Dwight Scott.

He added that during his time at the prison, which spans some 20 years, the changes have been quite notable. Not least of which is the length of sentences and the types of offences.

"Longer sentences and more serious offences now comprise the demographic in prison. Another observation I have made is that people are coming in at a younger age. As a result, the prison has had to learn to cater to all types and categories of prisoners," said Mr. Scott.

The issue of space is another very real challenge being faced by prison officials and with the same basic facility being used since 1975, and an ever growing national population to service, this can be tricky.

Deputy Director of Prisons Daniel Greaves, who has also been at the Northward facility for over 20 years elaborated.

"There are limited resources in terms of space but the truth is we cannot turn back prisoners at the gate. Once an individual turns up with a warrant, we have to accept them."



An inmate in his cell at Northward Prison. - PHOTOS: STUART WILSON

Mr. Greaves said alternative sentencing through the Drug Court and other means such as electronic monitoring has helped matters but the problem is still present.

The maximum capacity at Northward Prison is 165 inmates. There are 220 individuals serving time at the facility.

Rehabilitation

The hardships of prison life bear a universal theme that cannot be separated from the experience. This is evident in the longing that can be witnessed in the faces of inmates. Those who choose to make the best of their incarceration are able to do so by using some of the programmes available at all prisons in Cayman.

"We have recently been granted Centre Status from City and Guilds and now prisoners can come out with an external qualification. In fact the other day a young man was leaving after finishing his sentence and the thing he clutched tightest on his way through the gate was his certificate," exclaimed Mr. Scott. "Some of our inmates have even gotten distinctions. We have a commitment where we have to try with these individuals, irrespective of their crime".

Talapia farming is also done at the prison, in addition to traditional farming of vegetables and other crops, as well as rearing of goats and cows in order to be sold or used to feed the prison population at Northward. A host of other activities, which includes the option of learning a trade in the newly built vocational training area for mechanics and carpenters, avail prisoners of skills



A prisoner overseas a talapia breeding pool.

that assist them in living lives free of crime.

"The challenge is finding work to keep up with the prisoners' appetite. It has been said that Caymanians don't want to work but one of our biggest challenges is finding employment for 200 people on a compound as small as Northward," explained Mr. Greaves.

Prisoners Marty Whittaker and Asfor Webster spoke to the Caymanian Compass about their experience in prison. Mr. Whittaker is serving two years after violating his parole while Mr. Webster is in prison in connection with a murder.

"I find that the classes and the staff teach you to better handle your affairs and just generally give you more confidence. I am doing math, English and social studies at the City and Guilds level now. It's all affecting me in a positive way and I want to take advantage of it. I have a baby girl and I am getting married next month," said Mr. Webster.

Mr. Whittaker has passed courses in bookkeeping, computers and second level English for office use.

"I have been coming to prison since 1993 but I really feel like having this education might for once mean living a life free of prison," he said.

Math teacher and Educational Coordinator Alton McDonald is responsible in large part for bringing the learning programmes together.

There is also a team of psychologists at Northward who focus on sentence planning, delivery of programmes to address behaviour types and risk assessment for the Parole Board, deportation education, community support and accommodating probation.

Additionally, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Cayman Against Substance Abuse run regular programmes at Northward. All programmes are also available to Fairbanks and Eagle House.

Prison composition

As of 22 March there were 125 Caymanians, 17 Jamaicans, two Hondurans, two Americans, one Nicaraguan, three Cubans, two Romanians and one Indian serving sentences at Northward. While there were 48 Caymanians, three Jamaicans, three Hondurans, one Cuban, one New Zealander and one Vincentian on remand. Fairbanks' population is comprised of five Caymanians, one American and one Trinidadian serving sentences. There were five Caymanian women on remand at the facility. No figures were provided for the population of the Eagle House juvenile prison.

The number of convicted prisoners with deportation orders discharged from prison in the last year was 10.

All statistics and numbers compiled for this article were provided by the Cayman Islands Prison Department under the Freedom of Information Law.