

County jail breaks bad habits to go green

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Sustainability efforts save money, ease inmates' impact



by: CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT Inmates at the Multnomah County Inverness Jail wear recycled sandals pretty much everywhere, even while playing basketball. Before staff in the county's Sustainable Jail Project came up with the idea, the jails tossed 8,000 pairs of non-recyclable sandals a year into the landfill.

You won't meet a lot of Portland tree-hugger types among the inmates doing time at Multnomah County jails -- or, for that matter, among the corrections officers who keep them locked up.

But in the past year or two, there's been a surprising shift toward environmental awareness in the county's two jails.

They call it the Sustainable Jail Project.

Inmates now sip from reusable cups instead of throwaways, and play basketball in recyclable sandals. Those on kitchen duty scrape bits of leftover food into compost bins.

At the Inverness Jail laundry

in East Portland, where inmate bedding and clothes are washed, water draining from the washing machines is reclaimed, treated and reused.

"We are pretty green," says Michael Bailey, an inmate working in the laundry, proudly noting that wastewater no longer flows into nearby rivers.

The new attitude at the jail is as much about dollars and cents as it is a sudden change of heart in environmental consciousness. The first round of sustainability initiatives is saving Multnomah County's jail system \$400,000 a year, with more cost-saving measures on the way.

Multnomah County Chair Jeff Cogen has made sustainability a top political priority, and found a willing partner in Multnomah County Sheriff Dan Staton. Both were first elected to their respective posts in May 2010.

A sustainability team dispatched by Cogen convinced Staton and his colleagues that, when done right, sustainability can save money and aid the environment.

"It should matter," not just to inmates but to everyone in the county, says Bailey, who expects to be released soon after serving more than four months for contempt of court. "I pay taxes when I'm not in here."



TRIBUNE PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT • The Inverness Jail laundry now bundles clean garments and bedding with recycled twine instead of plastic bags, saving money and eliminating 75 miles a year in plastic wrap.

Easing tensions

In the past, strained relations were common between elected Multnomah County commissioners, who hold the jail system's purse strings, and the sheriff's office, led by the elected sheriff. The sustainability initiative has helped bridge that divide.

Lt. Steve Alexander, who was tapped to lead the jail's sustainability effort in mid-2010, says he was pretty skeptical about environmentalism at the time.

"As we went through it, to be honest, it was kind of an awakening to me," Alexander says of his growing commitment to environmentally sound practices.

The Sustainable Jail Project strives to harness the energy and creativity of employee volunteers who sit on the jail sustainability team. That model worked, says Chief Deputy Michael Shults, who is in charge of the Corrections Division, with Alexander regularly coming to him with a "posse of ideas."

Portland's strong environmental ethic is "catching on to people" at the jail, Shults says.

Matthew Winkel, an employee working in the jail laundry, came up with the idea of bundling cleaned and folded laundry with recyclable twine instead of packing it inside plastic bags. That eliminated 75 miles of plastic wrap used each year that wound up in the landfill, saving the jail a nifty \$9,000 a year.

Kat West, the county sustainability director, says she got the idea for the Sustainable Jail Project reading an article in the Sierra Club magazine about Washington's sustainable prison project, started by an Evergreen State College professor.

The county's jails are like miniature cities, West says, home to about 1,200 inmates at a time, or 38,000 during the course of a year. Jails are heavy users of all types of resources: food, water, sewers, electricity and gas.



TRIBUNE PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT • Rubbery cups used by inmates save the county jail system \$11,000 a year, replacing 800,000 Styrofoam cups that had been tossed into the trash each year after one use.

Not your typical safety issues

Jails can be a tough place to make changes because security is such a necessity. When safety specialist Melissa Regehr joined the sustainability team, she figured she'd put the kibosh on many ideas because of security concerns. But Regehr, like Alexander, says she was gradually convinced of the wisdom of environmental enhancements that also improve operations.

One example: a glass or plastic mug could be a weapon in the hands of an inmate, so the jail had been supplying throwaway Styrofoam cups. The first sustainability initiative a couple years ago was to substitute soft rubbery, reusable cups. That eliminated the need to buy 800,000 Styrofoam cups that were dumped in the trash each year, saving \$11,000 a year.

Because of similar safety concerns, the jail supplied inmates with stubby little pencils, the kind used to mark golf scores or jot down catalog numbers in the library. Regular-sized pencils or pens might be easier to use as weapons, or to fashion tattoos.

But inmates frequently used the little pencils once and tossed them, so the jail system was going through an astounding 1.2 million pencils a year.

As an alternative, the sustainability team came up with a flexible pen, similar to a pen cartridge. If an inmate tries to poke someone with it, the tip retracts.

Inmates used the stubby pencils to write graffiti on walls that was hard to wash off, while ink from the pens is washable, Alexander says.

Now the jails issue paper and pens to each inmate as needed, reinforcing a conservation ethic. The jail system only needs to buy 18,000 pens a year. Total savings: \$33,000.



TRIBUNE PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT • An inmate working in the Inverness Jail kitchen puts leftover food scraps into a compost bin, a cost-saving and environmentally friendly measure promoted by the Sustainable Jail Project.

Lower laundry bill

One of the most mundane sustainability initiatives packs the biggest cost savings: repackaging the disinfectant used to wash down jail cells and other spaces. The jail was paying about \$8 for a quart of the cleaning agent, but then switched to buying a liquid concentrate that staff pour into one-gallon containers. The cost plummeted to only 6 cents a gallon. Later, jail managers decided to refill and reuse the jugs, and the cost fell to 3 cents a gallon.

That simple idea saves a whopping \$268,000 a year and keeps 17,000 plastic jugs a year out of the landfill.

Shoes also can be used as weapons in jail, so inmates are all issued soft sandals, even for playing sports. With the advent of the Sustainable Jail Project, the jail switched from the old throwaway sandal to a recycled and recyclable design, which means 8,000 pairs a year don't have to get tossed into the landfill.

The Inverness laundry was a huge energy hog when the county scored a big grant from the Obama administration's federal stimulus bill to pay for a \$350,000 retrofit. Among other improvements, that funded a water treatment plant on site so the water can be reused. That cuts the jail's water and sewer bills and saves energy, as the filtered water is hotter and doesn't have to be heated as much as fresh water coming from Bull Run, says Mike Branson, who operates the laundry.

New overhead fluorescent lights at the laundry are motion-sensitive, dropping to half the normal intensity if there are no people moving underneath, Branson says.

The laundry is now \$57,000 a year cheaper to operate, so the investment will pay off in some six years.

Future cost savings will be greater, as Portland raises water and sewer rates.

Inmates at Inverness don't usually stay very long, with an average of only two weeks. Still, the county hopes some of its new conservation ethic will rub off on them. Inmates working in the kitchen are helping compost 10,000 pounds of food waste a month. That keeps the waste from going to the landfill, where it costs three times as much to dispose.

Sometimes the inmates have no choice. The showers now come with timers, cutting off water if inmates take too long.

Other changes will make life better for inmates.

The jail is working with Aramark, its food service contractor, to increase the amount of locally grown food it serves in the cafeteria.

Future goals

As part of the Sustainable Jail Project, the county is setting goals to dramatically cut resource usage to help meet ambitious goals of the Portland/Multnomah County Climate Action Plan. By 2030, the county hopes to cut energy

use at the jails an additional 30 percent, cut water use 35 percent and overall waste going to the landfill by 25 percent.

One future project in the works is replacing the thick legal volumes in the jail law library with digital versions. Some inmates working on legal research will tear a page out of the expensive, bound books they think pertains to their case. Putting the material on computers will save an estimated \$70,000 a year.

The jails also hope to provide permanent "sporks" for inmate meals instead of more expensive disposable utensils. And jail managers hope to shave \$50,000 off the cost of soap by issuing inmates big bars of soap instead of daily hotel-style bars.

Inverness Jail is exploring the idea of starting a garden tended by inmates this summer. In future years, jail managers hope to provide a full farm off-site, where locally grown food could be harvested for use in the jail kitchen.

West says her research has shown that Multnomah County has already gone further with its sustainability initiative than any other local jail system in the nation. But she and others say they're only getting started.