

MCI-Shirley is For The Birds

by

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Pigeons have made a home of MCI-Shirley since it opened in 1991. These dirty birds wait for inmates to feed them bits of bread and cake after every meal. Lately, officials of Shirley medium, a distressed bird cage located in eastern Massachusetts, have been cracking down.

Home to an overcrowded population of twelve hundred inmates, Shirley suffers from decay; it's an institution originally designed for just 720 inmates.

Recently, prison officials mounted on the edge of each of its six massive cell blocks screech owl puppets in the hope of scaring off the pigeon population.

These realistic looking screech owl scarecrows mounted on a swivel give the puppets an animated appearance. In fact, the large predatory creature with a pair of tufts of lengthened feathers on the head that resemble ears, kept the pigeon's confused and away for about a day or two.

Lately, this prison has been experiencing a spate of violence. Runaway drug traffic, a general breakdown in prison decorum, extortion, gang violence, and incidents sparked by gambling, home made alcohol, and race tension are taking their toll.

In the chow hall recently, I spoke with an inmate named "Red" who asked that I write a letter to the deputy superintendent for security about a policy of overcrowding during meals.

I agreed.

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Prison officials have a policy of calling cell blocks in a rotation for meals. Lately, inmates are forced to stand and wait for seats.

Prison dining halls are dangerous flashpoints for violence. Seating is carefully designated according to race, and ethnicity, a throwback to Jim Crow separate but equal.

During a recent visit to MCI-Shirley, the commissioner of Corrections indicated the chow hall - a nearly thirty year old prefabricated structure - will soon be renovated.

I worked in the kitchen, I witnessed meal trays being washed in cold water without detergent. Floors so decayed they must be routinely patched. A portion of the façade is buckling. Only recently has the industrial dishwasher been replaced.

One day, I found myself locked up for feeding the pigeon's. My excuse: I'm an old convict who likes to feed the birds."

In a recent memorandum from the deputy superintendent for operations, inmates feeding the pigeon's will be given a disciplinary report. An official "time out". During this time, as I accepted my punishment, I reflected on the priorities of his out of touch prison administration.

Watching the screech owls being disrespected by the pigeon's, this institution suffered a fire in the school building, fights in the chow hall, plumbing problems plague this prison - inmates are often forced to walk throughout the compound to shower in nearby cell blocks. And I thought, "Nero is fiddling as Rome burns."

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Today, the screech owl puppets are gone. The experiment failed. But, the pigeon's remain, and so do the systemic problems facing the inmate population.

Guards, many young, stand a post, and like the scarecrow are a hollow deterrent to a growing restless overcrowded prison population.

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