

Jail Oversight Board Inspection Report

Date of Visit: May 14, 2025

Time of Arrival: 11:05 AM

Oversight Visitors: Bethany Hallam & MAN-E

I. General Observations

We arrived at the Allegheny County Jail at approximately 11:05 AM and proceeded upstairs at 11:30 AM after a brief wait. Sergeant Tucker was present at the front desk during our entry, and as always was extremely helpful in getting us the information we needed for our inspection. Over the course of the visit, we observed a range of troubling conditions affecting incarcerated individuals across multiple pods. Recurring issues included excessive lockdowns, inadequate access to mental health care and medical treatment, faulty or missing tablets, insufficient recreational equipment, limited language access, and perceived retaliation against those who file grievances. There were also some positive experiences during our inspection, including numerous staff members expressing feeling a culture shift beginning to happen in the facility that they say (and we agree) was long overdue.

II. Pod Conditions and Individual Reports

Pod 1C (Women's Unit & Classification/Detox Area):

We began our visit in Pod 1C, which serves multiple functions. The upper tier operates like a restrictive housing unit for women, with tethered escorts for recreation and showers conducted in cages. The lower tier houses women in intake or detox status, where they are locked down for nearly the entire day. Incarcerated individuals on the lower level expressed feeling isolated and unable to access basic services such as phones or adequately functioning tablets. One incarcerated woman described this setup as punitive and dehumanizing, especially for those still awaiting classification. Religious accommodation issues were also raised. One woman stated that [REDACTED] failed to serve meals on time to those fasting for Ramadan, citing personal convenience as justification, which is a clear violation of religious rights. [REDACTED] was named in multiple allegations of retaliatory behavior against residents who file grievances. Lastly, we noted that there were no visible posters or signage providing information about language access services in either intake or classification areas, despite previous claims that such materials were in place.

Pod 2D:

In Pod 2D, we spoke with several individuals who raised concerns regarding recreation and nutrition. The primary request here was for new basketballs. Each pod reportedly has two, but every basketball we observed was in extremely poor condition with no remaining grip. This may be a relatively simple issue to address through the Incarcerated Individuals Welfare Fund,

though it arguably falls under the jail's budget responsibilities. Residents also voiced dissatisfaction with the breakfast menu items, specifically the grits, which they described as inedible. They requested more cereal options instead. Additionally, several participants in the Batterer's Intervention Program noted that they used to receive snacks as part of their sessions, but this practice has been discontinued without explanation. Multiple residents expressed frustration that they are unable to communicate directly with the Jail Oversight Board, citing a lack of liaison forms and no method of sending messages via the tablets.

Pod 3E:

Pod 3E presented numerous concerns. A major recurring theme was the extended lockdowns, which were reportedly triggered by facility issues such as a broken hallway door or staffing shortages. Residents questioned why entire pods are locked down when the problem lies outside their control. Several individuals reported waiting two to three weeks before receiving a tablet, while others received broken tablets or were charged for damage they did not cause. Despite reporting these problems, they were often told the issue would be added to a list that never results in action. One person suggested making tablet usage free during lockdowns, as families are unfairly burdened with the costs during times of forced confinement. A resident who had previously been on Pod 4F in protective custody transferred to 3E specifically to gain more consistent access to therapy, which is reportedly unavailable or unreliable on the PC pods. Others noted broken tablets and a lack of response to grievances. We also heard from a man denied access to alternative housing due to a violent offense committed five years ago. He was informed he must wait 10 years in total, though this appears to be an unwritten policy. Several residents suggested that 3E be allowed staggered recreation (split rec) to ensure some pod members have regular access to showers and outdoor time, even under modified lockdowns.

Pod 3B:

In Pod 3B, we met with several individuals, including [REDACTED], a known peer advocate. He spoke extensively about the harmful impact of repeated lockdowns and suggested reimplementing a split-rec system to account for staff shortages. Under this proposal, half the pod could access recreation while the other half remains in their cells, rotating as needed, which is a model utilized many times in the past. [REDACTED] emphasized that no one should go without a shower or time out of their cell for days on end, especially under modified lockdowns. He also noted that many grievances filed on both paper and tablet platforms go unanswered, and commissary access is inconsistent. His remarks, and those of others, pointed to the widespread belief that correctional officers are weaponizing lockdowns under the guise of staffing shortages, despite large numbers of idle staff visibly present in hallways during each of our inspections.

III. Additional Observations

While riding the elevator, we witnessed a staff member patrolling the fourth floor with a shotgun visibly strapped across his chest. The purpose of this display was unclear. Its presence inside the facility may be seen as excessive and potentially traumatizing to incarcerated individuals, particularly given the already heightened tensions throughout the jail.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

Our visit to the Allegheny County Jail revealed troubling patterns of neglect, inconsistency, and possible retaliation within every pod we visited. Pod 1C raised serious concerns around religious rights, strip search protocols, and the conditions for women in detox or classification. Pod 2D brought up the deterioration of recreational resources, inadequate nutrition, and breakdowns in communication with the Oversight Board. Pod 3E was dominated by complaints about extended lockdowns, faulty tablets, lack of medical follow-up, and unclear housing policies. Pod 3B echoed many of these concerns and added calls for institutional reform around grievance response, recreation schedules, and staff accountability.

We recommend an immediate review of religious accommodation practices, including a formal inquiry into [REDACTED] conduct during Ramadan. There should be an audit of protective custody policies, mental health service delivery, and physical accommodations like bunk assignments. The tablet distribution and repair process must be standardized and transparent, with tablet access made free during lockdowns. Clear policies should be developed for eligibility for alternative housing, and all signage related to language access must be posted where required. The Board should also explore options for funding new recreational equipment and work with jail administration to create a direct communication pathway, likely through tablets, between residents and the Jail Oversight Board. Finally, the unit management system seems to have had a great impact on the operations of the jail, with unit managers taking ownership of and having visible pride in their work, something we had not seen much of previously.
