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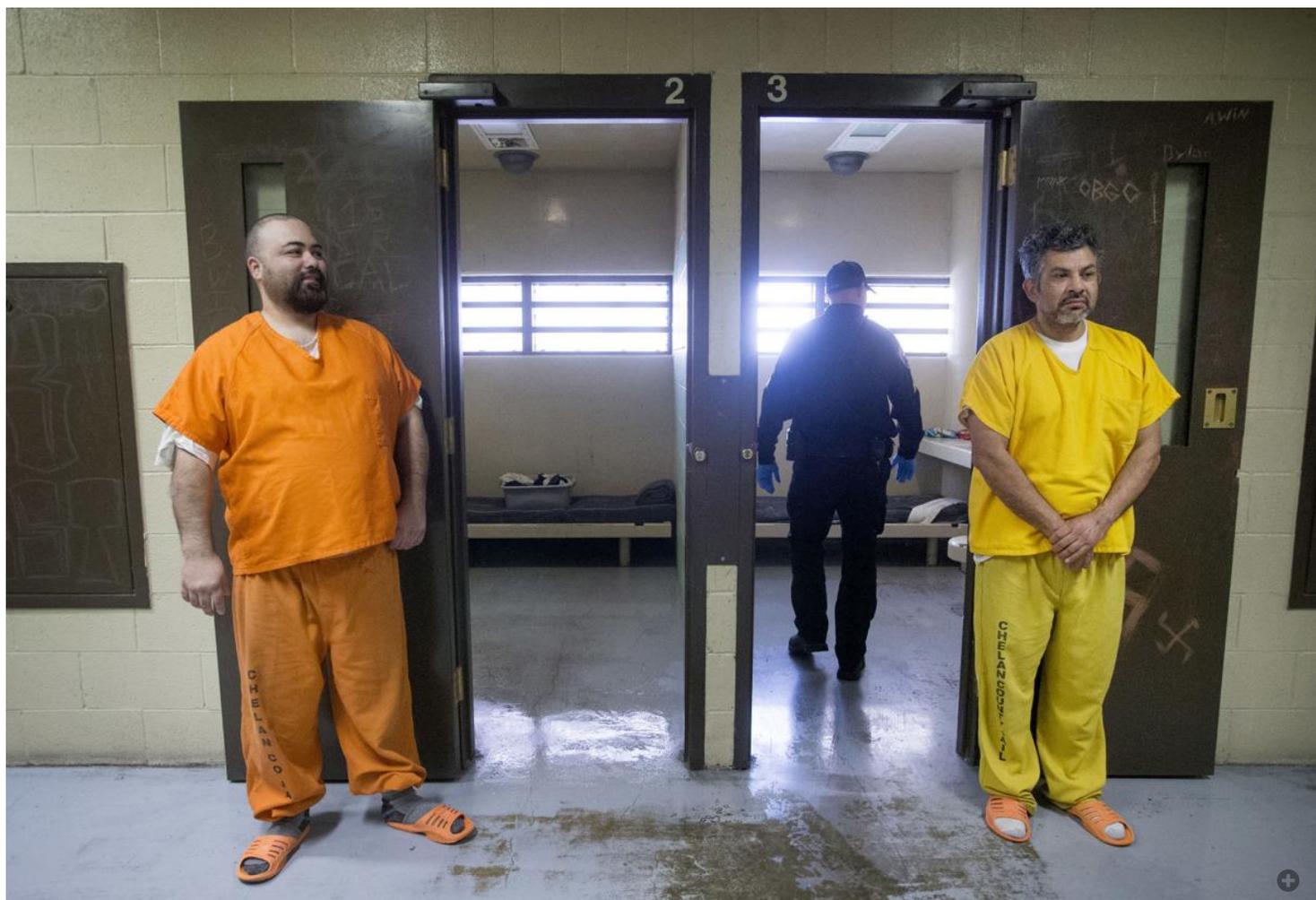
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# Going inside Chelan County's jail

By Tony Buhr

World staff writer Jun 18, 2019





*First of two parts*

*Thursday: We look at how Chelan County's jail got in this condition and at the plan going forward.*

WENATCHEE — I stand in the lobby of the Chelan County Regional Justice Center staring at a flatscreen TV being used as a notice board.



It's unclear how long the TV has been broken at what's basically the front door of the 35-year-old jail, but a piece of paper has been taped over it. The jail, it says, isn't responsible if the machines for depositing commissary or telephone funds aren't working. They should call the companies that manage the machines instead.

The lobby to the jail is drab, with a row of hard plastic chairs, blinds blocking a series of windows and a large metal door that leads into the jail.

### It's a jail not a prison

It's important to remember that a lot of people incarcerated in the jail have not been convicted of a crime, Chief Deputy Sean Larsen said. Many people are facing charges and going through court proceedings. They also might be in custody for misdemeanor driving offenses, and not felonies or violent crimes.

There is a buzzing sound, the metal door opens and Chief Deputy of Operations Sean Larsen comes to collect me. The door closes behind him. Larsen asks, "Are you ready to go?" It's May 9 and I'm here to spend the day in the jail to look at its condition and talk about the problems it faces.

The jail staff wants to let me know about the safety features needed to reduce assaults, the drug and alcohol problems and the overall wear and tear on the building.

Larsen talks into his radio, the buzzing sound repeats, he swings the heavy metal door back open and we walk into the jail.

## How to make pruno

It's 7:30 a.m. and the jail's head staff, including its sergeants, mental health professional, healthcare manager and kitchen staff manager meet in a conference room.

The same room is also used for chapel services, video court appearances, and Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, Larsen said.

Sgt. Jeremy Cheever sits in a chair to the left side of the room. Cheever was managing classification that week, deciding where inmates are placed in jail based on gang affiliation, past crimes and even family drama.

He tells the staff and his boss, Larsen, that there have been quite a few violent felons booked over the past few days, including two with second-degree assault charges.

Cheever adds that an inmate was assaulted last night. The inmate was playing cards when someone sucker punched him. The staff took him to Central Washington Hospital and he received stitches. But they never figured out who punched the guy, because there are no cameras in the cell.

Inmates in the same cell were also caught smoking potato peels, he said.

Inmate assaults have gone down since staff started performing more regular checks in the cells this year, Cheever said. In 2017 the jail had 92 assaults between inmates. In 2018 that number dropped to 79 and in 2019 there were 29 assaults through April.

More staff and cameras in the cells would help reduce the number of assaults between inmates, he said. Jail staff would be able to hold inmates accountable for damage to the jail.

At the moment, inmates often can get away with assaulting each other unless someone comes forward to say what happened, Cheever said. Inmates also shove toothpaste or feces into vents, use outlets to start fires and hide drugs and jailhouse wine in their cells. A camera system would fix all of those problems.

"They're addicts and they like to smoke stuff," Larsen says to me as an aside during the meeting. "So, if they can get their hands on just about anything they can roll in a piece of newspaper, they will light it up. If they have a way to get it on fire."

The inmates will use the outlets to ignite the paper, Larsen said. They'll stick pencil lead and toilet paper into the outlets.

Another inmate, who was on work release, was caught handing out swastika necklaces to other inmates, Cheever said.

Food Service Manager Joanne Richards then asked if the kitchen staff should stop serving grapes. Inmates can use the grapes to make jailhouse wine, also called pruno, she said.

The inmates take fruit, plus bread and put it in a plastic bag, Larsen said. They then need to find a heat source like underneath a mattress or above a ceiling light.

Chief Deputy of Administration Chris Sharp said it should be okay to accept the grapes since staff members are now doing daily bed checks in the cells. The jail is also looking into getting a K9 officer that could be trained to detect pruno.

Drinking pruno is pretty dangerous, Cheever said. It's impossible to know the alcohol percentage and it can have all kinds of effects on people.

## No snitches

At 8 a.m., the staff starts to conduct bed checks. This is a new procedure and it is a part of an incentive program, Larsen said.

The staff checks each of the cells, talks to the inmates, delivers mail and tells them about court appearances, he said. The inmates are expected to be out of bed, dressed, have the cell cleaned and their personal belongings placed in a tub at the foot of their bed.

"So some of the rewards are they get an incentive meal," Larsen said. "(Like) the kitchen makes them double cheeseburgers and french fries instead of the regular meal. (Or) we would go out and purchase ice cream sandwiches."

One of the things Larsen pointed out is that some of the cells are placed at the end of dark hallways. The hallways are dark so guards can look into them, but inmates can't see out of them, he said.

It's difficult, though, to look into some of the cells. The windows are sometimes limited and there are sections inside that aren't visible from the outside. None of these cells contain cameras, Larsen said.

The jail staff ushers me inside the cells as they do checks. There is a small room in between the hallway and the inside of the cells. Several guards, World photographer Don Seabrook and me all cram inside of the tiny room. The buzzer sounds and the door to the cell opens.

The first thing that hits me when walking inside the cells is the smell. The place reeks of unwashed human flesh. It's actually an improvement from the last time I was there in October on a tour with the Chelan County commissioners about the jail's condition.

One of the inmates, Dwayne D. Horner, 29, gets excited to talk to a reporter and begins discussing cooking sausages using the outlets in front of the jail staff. The staff members just laugh and shake their heads. They're well aware that this is happening.

Horner gives me his name when I ask.

The inmates get the sausages from commissary, spear them on spoons and wrap the handle with toilet paper, he said. They'll then cook the food next to a vent so the smoke doesn't trigger a fire alarm.

Horner also pointed out that the lack of cameras provides opportunities for jailhouse justice.

"We can handle our business by ourselves," he said. "We don't have front row seats in front of (the cell) where the (correctional officers) can see our business. So we can fight if we have a disagreement, you know. We're not snitching in this group, if you know what I mean."

When we leave Larsen tells me that the other inmates probably didn't appreciate Horner being so talkative. But he just can't help himself, Larsen said, he's a talker.

In one of the cells Chief Deputy Sharp takes me aside and shows me missing shower tiles. The inmates rip up the tiles and use them to scratch graffiti on the windows and walls. They can also throw them at the windows and break the glass.

Inmates have used the broken windows to try and pull drugs into the cells, according previous Wenatchee World reporting.

In the gaps between the missing tiles is black gunk that looks like mold. It's unsafe for inmates to clean between the tiles, though, Sharp said.

"They should have a place that doesn't have tile opened up with possible bacteria growing in it," Sharp said.

In another cell an inmate points out that the only way to flush one of the toilets is to flush both toilets at the same time.

## Smuggling drugs

At 9:30 a.m., Chief Deputy Larsen takes me back down to booking, where two state Department of Corrections inmates are being checked into the jail.

The DOC inmates will be held at the jail for two or three days for violating the terms of their parole, he said.

"And it is problematic because if they are here for three days, it is pretty easy to be the (drug) mule," Larsen said.

The inmates place drugs, tobacco and even needles in balloons and insert it into their anal cavities, he said.

It's illegal for jail staff to search inside of a person's cavities without a warrant, Larsen said. But they can sometimes apply for a warrant if there is probable cause and have a trained medical professional look.

"Now when those things rupture that causes a problem," he said. "We've had instances in the jail over the years. They'll come in, we begin the process and their behavior begins to go into something critical."

Inmates have even overdosed during booking, because they ingested something that ruptured and flooded their body, Larsen said.

Several months ago a bad batch of drugs swept through the jail, he said. It was a combination of stuff that caused people to act violently. One man cut off one of his own testicles and ate it, Larsen said.

Drug smuggling from DOC holds became such a problem that jail staff started quarantining DOC inmates away from the rest of the jail population, he said.

An hour after booking the two DOC holds, jail staff caught the inmates in the same cell smoking marijuana. The staff took me down to the cell to see for myself and it reeked of cannabis.

If the cells contained cameras staff could have figured out who brought the drugs and prosecuted them, he said. As it stands, the jail staff moved the two DOC offenders to another cell, changed their clothes and flushed the remaining marijuana down the toilet.

Staff will likely never know who brought the marijuana into the cell, unless one of inmates tells them, Larsen said.

## Segregation units

At 11 a.m., the jail staff takes me to one of the segregation units. Unlike the other cells the segregation units are two stories with day rooms. The inmates in the segregation units spend most of the day in roughly 11 by 7 foot individual cells.

This is where the jail keeps its more violent inmates, those with medical needs and those who might be in danger if placed in general population cells, Larsen said.

They get to spend about an hour a day in the day room or in the yard, he said. The yard is a concrete box open to the elements that inmates can use. It does not have basketball hoops or a bench press like in the movies. It is just a concrete box.

"They are not all athletes," Larsen said about why there is so little provided for the yard. "And they hurt themselves."

When I visited the segregation cells' dayroom, I saw feces smeared into the vents and window frames. Inmates save it in plastic baggies so they can use it later, Larsen said.

The staff wasn't sure who was doing it, he said. But they were trying to figure it out and in the meantime it was the duty of correctional officers to clean the unit.

Larsen then took me to a room that connected two of the segregation units. The room was off limits to the inmates and supposed to be impossible to access, but there was still graffiti on the inside.

The staff also placed a mattress on the floor of this room to prevent the inmates from sliding drugs between the two segregation units, he said.

A lot of people with serious mental health issues end up in these segregation units, Larsen said.

People with mental illness don't belong in jail, he said. But there isn't anywhere else to put them. Jails have become the mental healthcare centers for communities.

"The largest mental health facility in Washington state is the King County jail," he said. "The largest mental health facility in the United States is the Los Angeles County Jail."

And the largest mental health facility in Wenatchee is the Chelan County Regional Justice Center, Larsen said.

At 11:30 a.m. my tour of the jail ended. I go back out into the lobby, past the broken TV, into the bright springtime sunlight and run into Chelan County Commissioner Kevin Overbay in a pair of shorts and a Hawaiian-style shirt.

Overbay smiles and shakes hands with the jail staff who were leaving with me. It was the Chelan County employee-appreciation picnic day in Memorial Park and there was a barbecue. Larsen and his staff left to grab some hot dogs and burgers.

And I left with several details impressed upon my mind:

- One that the technology at the jail is light-years behind most any workplace. Jail staff still use whiteboards and dry erase markers instead of computers.
- The cells need cameras to stop assaults and improve conditions. With cameras staff could catch people damaging property and hold people accountable for assaults.
- The jail is an old building. It's 35 years old and showing the wear and tear.
- Drug use and mental health are serious problems. Inmates are desperate to get drugs into the jail and the staff need tools to prevent smuggling.

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Tony Buhr has been a professional reporter for almost seven years. He worked for the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin as a cops and courts reporter. The Ellensburg Daily Records as a cops and courts, breaking news, agriculture and water reporter.

