

County Jail Rated Among Nation's Best

by [Richard McCarthy](#)

The Hampden County Correctional Center at Stony Brook in Ludlow, administered by Sheriff Michael J. Ashe, Jr., may be the best correctional institution in the nation.

It may seem odd to refer to a jail as "best" because corrections is a bad-news business. Escapes, disturbances, employees gone bad, and inmates "having it too good" are more interesting to the public than the daily grind to "strive for excellence," as Ashe puts it.

But I believe that it should be no more unusual to talk of a top-flight correctional institution than it is to talk of an outstanding hospital. We don't blame hospitals for the illnesses and accidents that they attempt to treat. Neither should we blame correctional institutions for the existence of crime in a community.

What we in corrections can strive to do is assure a safe, secure, orderly and demanding institution, and to bring productivity and positivity into an inherently negative situation.

For me to call our correctional institution the best in the nation may seem like bragging, but I can back that up. The accreditation team of the American Correctional Association - the nation's foremost professional organization of correctional practitioners - gave top scores, 100 percent, to the Hampden County Sheriff's Department in seven out of eight categories, and a 98.6 percent score in the eighth.

In a September 28, 1994 article in the Springfield Union-News, Al Bennett, head of the ACA accreditation team, said that he would run out of superlatives when he wrote his report on the Hampden County Correctional Center .

Behind these national accolades for the crisp, clean, rigorous and professional daily operation of the facility lie a number of innovative efforts and accomplishments.

We have become a model of inmate community service restitution. We now provide 80,000 hours of such service each year by minimum security inmates from Stony Brook and the Western Massachusetts Correctional Alcohol Center , and from participants in the Day Reporting Center .

These restitution crews work on roadways, parks, cemeteries, housing for the elderly developments, etc., for public and non-profit agencies throughout our county.

We've also insisted that inmates at the jail "answer the bell" each morning for a productive day just like the rest of us have to. Our inmates do all of the housekeeping chores on our living units and, under staff supervision, do a good deal of work in the kitchen, laundry and maintenance departments

Through our prison industry program, our inmates even save the taxpayers money by making all the inmate uniforms worn here at the facility.

Our high school equivalency program recently recorded a milestone: 3,500 inmates have earned a G.E.D. or high school equivalency degree since the program was founded by Ashe.

Last year alone over 225 individuals achieved their G.E.D.'s - the largest number of any correctional institution in the commonwealth.

We have a program of weekend spiritual retreats shared by inmates and lay volunteers from the community. These retreats profoundly affect many who participate. Indeed, the recidivism rate of those who participate in these retreats is half that of those who do not.

In 1986, we were the first jurisdiction in the nation to establish a Day Reporting Center. Through this program an offender nearing the end of his sentence lives at home. It costs one quarter as much as incarceration behind the fences, and it also fights recidivism by providing strict supervision and support at the crucial time of community re-entry. The National Institute of Justice uses our program as a model, and delegations from over 65 different jurisdictions - from Arizona, Alabama, Texas, Minnesota, etc. - have come to study our operation. Many of these jurisdictions founded programs emulating ours.

Our correctional officers are an excellent example of why the old term and stereotype of "guards" is no longer applicable. Under our direct-supervision, unit-management mode of operation, officers make day-to-day decisions far beyond the cliché of just opening and closing doors. Correctional officers are computer literate, trained in interpersonal communication skills, and function as "community police" on our living units. Forty-four percent of our uniform staff now hold college degrees, including 13 with master's degrees.

And all of this has been done without extravagance.

Hampden County's cost per inmate is the third lowest of the 13 Massachusetts county jails. We are able to do this partly because we've been pioneers in safe and effective community sanctions such as day reporting, in which cost per inmate is significantly lower than a jail cell.

This extensive correctional program does not grow out of some fuzzy-minded, misplaced "do-gooderism." It developed from the very real assessment that everyone is better served when inmates put in a productive, demanding day.

Why does Hampden County have what may very well be the best correctional institution in the nation? The consensus is that we have an uncommon leader as sheriff.

Sheriff Michael J. Ashe, Jr.'s driving work ethic, his sense of duty, willingness to innovate, and ability to inspire others to "go to the wall" are common knowledge among those in the field.

Striving for all-around excellence on a daily basis does not make us immune to the difficulties that seem endemic to jails and prisons.

We are not immune to the impulsive offender who breaches trust in a community sanctions program, nor to the fights, assaults and occasional larger disturbances by inmates, nor to the rare "bad apple" employee who acts unethically.

But these unusual happenings, these "man-bites-dog" news events, should not obscure the day-to-day reality that in Hampden County the norm is a correction operation in the forefront of our nation.

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