

Testing Concepts to Reduce Violence and Use of Restricted Housing

Since the fall of 2015, DOC employees of all classifications have been meeting to address the need to reduce the use of administrative segregation (known as restricted housing in Pennsylvania). The DOC is committed to doing this while reducing the incidents of inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-staff assaults.

For nearly a year, employees have been assigned to and working on committees that look into a variety of issues.

The DOC also has joined forces with BetaGov, a non-profit organization that helps agencies take concepts and put them into workable and measurable concepts.

DOC employees suggest concepts and BetaGov helps put the concepts into action. Many concepts are now being piloted (or tested, in other words). Some concepts may prove useful, while others may not, and that's what makes the piloting of those concepts so important. We'll try something and if it works we'll implement it. But if we try something and it doesn't work, we move on to another concept to test.

Since the DOC partnered with BetaGov, DOC employees have submitted more than 100 ideas or concepts for trials ... all meant to reduce the need for the use of administrative segregation and all done while working to reduce inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-employee violence in our state prisons. **UPDATE: A total of 160 ideas or concepts for trial have been submitted by DOC employees.**

Some concepts that are in some form of being tested include:

*NOTE: Updates to this article that was initially written in October 2016 are in **GREEN** text and/or strike through formatting.*

UNDERWAY

Swift, Certain and Fair (SCF) Pod – UNDERWAY

SCI Somerset

UPDATE: SCF has expanded out to six units at SCI Somerset, and the prison staff continues to move toward the entire facility operating under this model by 2018.

EXPANDED to (and are either being developed or are underway) Albion (underway), Benner Township (concluded), Cambridge Springs, Coal Township, Fayette, Frackville, Houtzdale, Mahanoy, Mercer and Muncy.

certain (i.e., specified) with respect to how many times a specific behavior is observed in the previous 365 days.

A preliminary review of results 90 days after the pilot began shows promising results.

The SCF pod has had fewer misconducts, infractions and grievances compared with other pods at SCI Somerset. Somerset leadership notes that staff are reporting positive interaction between the unit staff and inmates, reduced stress levels and an increased sense of security in their work environment.

Based on the early positive results, SCI Somerset has been granted approval to extend the pilot for 90 days and to begin another SCF pilot on another pod in the facility. External researchers are conducting a formal evaluation of SCF at SCI Somerset, and the DOC has decided to extend the pilot to 12 other state prisons.

Limited Privilege Housing Unit (LPHU) - UNDERWAY SCI Laurel Highlands, Pennsylvania

Are segregation alternatives effective at producing desired behavioral changes in non-violent inmates? A groundbreaking pilot program at SCI Laurel Highlands will test that question by creating a new step in the facility's disciplinary process.



Instead of being placed in segregation, inmates with non-violent misconduct infractions who do not pose a security risk will be put in the facility's Limited Privilege Housing Unit (LPHU). Unlike inmates in segregation, LPHU inmates will be permitted to leave their cells every day without restraints for scheduled activities such as meals, showers, programming and time in the segregation yard with an additional inmate. All movements will be controlled and observed by the unit control center, and inmates will be subjected to weekly review by unit staff.

Other conditions typical to restricted housing units, such as intake property processing and suicide risk assessments, will remain the same. When not participating in scheduled activities, inmates will be in their cell with the door secured.

Adult Coloring Books – UNDERWAY

SCI Mahanoy

SCI Mahanoy is currently conducting a trial to examine the effectiveness of an individual art program using adult coloring books to reduce anxiety and depression while inmates are in restricted housing.

Inmates held in restricted housing units for extended periods of time are often subject to exacerbated psychological stress. (Metzer & Fellner, 2010). The heightened stress experienced by these inmates can result in an outbreak of violence, suicidal attempts, and psychological disorders which jeopardizes the safety of prison staff and inmates.

Art therapy has been associated with a decrease in negative behaviors. As a therapy tool, use of adult coloring books may calm anxiety and elevate mood. Although coloring books in one's cell is not art therapy guided by a therapist, the outcomes may be similarly positive.

The RHU Coloring Trial started on September 12, 2016. Stage 1 will end on October 12th (30 days). Stage 2 will end on November 11th (60 days). If there are any remaining subjects from the baseline measurements, 90 day measurements will be collected on December 12th.



The Blue Room - UNDERWAY

SCI Laurel Highlands

It is well-known that segregation can have deleterious effects on inmate mental health. Research suggests that a natural environment, even if only simulated, can help reduce stress. Inspired by related work done at other institutions, SCI Laurel Highlands is seeking to transform its restrictive housing unit by creating a "Blue Room."

Aptly named, the Blue Room contains a television screen and chair so that RHU inmates can watch nature images and listen to tranquil natural sounds, such as a streaming river. The room's walls feature a soothing ocean mural; artificial indoor plants complete the scene. RHU inmates will be sent to the Blue Room for one-hour increments. Officials at SCI Laurel Highlands hope that this intervention will reduce tensions, violence, and noncompliance among inmates while also having a positive effect on their mental health.

Restricted Housing Unit (RHU) Tablets – UNDERWAY

SCI Smithfield

On May 1, 2016, SCI Smithfield began examining the use of a mobile kiosk and personal tablet devices as an incentive for good behavior for inmates housed in the restricted housing unit (RHU). The goal of this trial is to determine whether it reduces misbehaviors.



Inmates who have demonstrated a positive adjustment over a set period of time while housed in the RHU are eligible to use their previously purchased tablet or use the kiosk (if they don't already own a tablet device). The kiosk and the personal tablet allows the inmate to retrieve e-mail messages, submit internal paperwork and access approved music. While an inmate can compose messages on the personal tablet, the message cannot be sent without being connected to the kiosk. Tablets and kiosks are used daily by general population inmates, but RHU inmates are not permitted these items.

When criteria is met and approval is given for this privilege, if the inmate owns a personal tablet, it will be issued to him from his property and he will retain it in his RHU cell. All approved inmates with or without a tablet may then request to use the kiosk unit. The inmate submits a "Request For Use" form, and access is granted on a first come, first served basis. The inmate is then escorted to an individual treatment unit and secured inside. The portable kiosk unit is placed in front of the unit for the inmate to use for a 15-minutes.

The program has shown good potential as a useful tool for RHU and administrative staff at Smithfield. Grievances, misconducts and use of force incidents have all been on the decline. Not all of the reductions can be contributed solely to this program, but it is and has been an effective tool in some scenarios.

Medical Unit Mural - UNDERWAY

SCI Laurel Highlands

Vivid pops of bright yellow, hints of hot pink and strokes of electric blue immediately catch the eye, framing the mysterious shadow of a sunken ship in the distance. Orcas glide serenely through clear blue depths as gleaming rays of sunlight dance weightlessly in the water. Sharks swim past a school of fish, left undisturbed to graze in a coral reef.

This scene is not located in the Caribbean, but in a Pennsylvania prison. Officials at SCI Laurel Highlands have had the walls of the facility's medical unit painted in order to learn more about how changing spaces transforms human behavior. While art and nature therapy have been used successfully in a variety of contexts, the use of artwork in prisons is a relatively new concept. Gazing at the mural, one might not even notice the secured doors, meal tray slots and concrete blocks over which it is painted.

Aromatherapy – UNDERWAY

SCIs Frackville and **Retreat (COMPLETED)**

Prisons house hundreds of people who are all confined to a unit comprised of numerous cells that serve as all-in-one bathrooms, bedrooms and eating areas. As you can imagine, these areas have their own unique aromas.

While it may seem obvious, bad odors, like that of feces, can elicit a negative feeling, while good odors, like peppermint, can elicit a positive feeling. How we associate an odor directly influences our mood, and our mood directly influences cognitive thinking and behavior.

Research findings show that people exposed to odors widely accepted as pleasant—like baked cookies or fresh coffee—were more likely to act kindly towards others than those who were not exposed to the pleasant odors (Herz, 2002).

SCIs Frackville, Pittsburgh and Retreat volunteered to test whether exposing inmates to pleasant odors reduces anxiety and increases productivity and prosocial behavior.

Frackville conducted its trial in the prison's behavior modification unit in July 2016. Results haven't shown a positive effect, but officials also noticed an issue with the delivery of the aroma. Therefore, another month of testing will be conducted.



SCI Retreat launched a lavender/eucalyptus aromatherapy trial on September 26, 2016, in its secure residential treatment unit. The trial is presently underway and will conclude on January 30, 2017. There are two diffusers on the unit that dispense lavender/eucalyptus scents.

SCI Pittsburgh is in the process of developing its trial.

Fish Tanks – ~~ABOUT TO BEGIN~~ UNDERWAY

SCI Waymart

Two personal care units at SCI Waymart will participate in a trial to determine whether the placement of fish tanks in certain housing units reduces anxiety and increases overall well-being.

Studies suggest that environment has major effects on people, which can alter behavior for the better and for the worse. An unpleasant environment increases one's stress levels, which in turn can have negative psychological and physiological effects. Living in an isolated environment, like prison may cause feelings of depression and anxiety that can worsen over time, leading to a range of feelings from irritability to full blown rage (Shaley, 2008, p. 16). In efforts to reduce levels of anxiety, which can directly affect the safety of staff and other inmates, it is important to address any improvements that can be made to better prison environments.



There is a lack of extensive research relating to the benefits of aquariums; however, their appeal has been noted by divers, aquarium visitors, documentaries and people who own their own fish tanks. Introducing fish tanks into prison environments will add a natural component to the confinement of the built surroundings, which may aid in providing 'soft' fascination for inmates, drawing their attention away from their daily stressors. Lower anxiety levels may lead to reduced feelings of frustration and anger that can lead to violence.

UPDATE: The trial began the first week of January 2017. A 75-gallon fish tank was placed on K1 block of the Personal Care Unit (PCU). The second block of the PCU, K2, did not receive a fish tank. At the beginning of the trial, inmates on both floors of the PCU were given self-report surveys to complete. Staff regularly assigned to the PCU were also given surveys to complete. In addition, staff completed a short assessment form on each inmate on the PCU. At the end of the trial (four or five months), staff and inmates will again complete the self-report surveys. Staff assessment forms will be done several times throughout the trial. It is hoped that inmates will report an improvement in their levels of anxiety and sense of well-being on the floor with the fish tank and that this will be corroborated with improved observed objective behaviors by staff.

Visitor Notification Letter – ~~ABOUT TO BEGIN~~ UNDERWAY

SCIs Camp Hill and Pittsburgh

SCIs Camp Hill and Pittsburgh will host trials that study the effects of visitor notification letters. Beginning late-October or early-November, one group of visitors will receive letters informing them only of their addition to an inmate's visitor's list. The second group will receive letters of the same and also will include documentation outlining visiting policies and that emphasize consequences of bringing contraband onto prison premises.

The two groups at the two prisons will be studied to see if the number of contraband incidents occurring both in the parking lot and during visitation, along with associated inmate misconducts, are reduced.

COMPLETED

Colored Bed Linens – ~~ABOUT TO BEGIN~~ COMPLETED

SCI Fayette

Prisons can be simple and mundane, with most cells having a basic, metal toilet and a bunk bed made of metal. Colors are generally very neutral. Studies show that inmates undergo psychological changes as they adapt to the prison surroundings and institutional routines. The dull palette of prison cells can increase stress experienced by inmates, which often can result in heightened aggravation that leads to violence. Changing the atmosphere through simple means could reduce inmate anxiety and increase psychological wellbeing.



SCI Fayette's pilot of this concept will begin on October 27, 2016, and will run through December 27, 2016, after which results will be reviewed to determine whether this should be expanded to additional prisons for further study.

Crisis Intervention Teams in Residential Treatment Units – ~~UNDERWAY~~ COMPLETED

SCI Greene

SCI Greene is currently hosting a trial to examine the effectiveness of Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training for staff members working on the Residential Treatment Unit's (RTU's). During this trial CIT-trained staff work one pod of the unit while non-CIT-trained staff are assigned to the other.

Inmates housed in the RTU often experience emotional crises. This trial will measure the effectiveness of CIT-trained staff for improving mental health outcomes for those housed in RTU's.



The RTU is designed to provide structure, consistency and support for inmates diagnosed with a serious psychiatric disorder and/or serious impairment to psychological functioning.

Data to be collected during the trial includes medication compliance, misconducts, program attendance, POC placement, self-injurious behavior and Diversionary Treatment Unit placement. The trial began August 1, 2016, and will last four months.

“Chill Plan” - COMPLETED

SCIs Cambridge Springs and Muncy

According to a number of studies and articles, female inmates are more prone to experience higher rates of mental health problems, and research suggest that treatments and programs help female inmates to reduce depression and anxiety, thus mitigating psychiatric disorders.

A concept being tested at the DOC’s two female prisons is called a “Chill Plan.”

This strategy equips inmates with crisis management plans as a coping mechanism that allows them to manage their emotional breakdowns and to prevent a mental crisis from occurring.

The Chill Plan help inmates to identify triggers and signs of escalating emotional crises and provides personalized strategies for calming themselves before emotion completely takes over and negative consequences ensue. Also with this information, staff can make earlier detection of an escalating emotional crisis and prompt the personalized strategy.

The Chill Plan encourages targeted inmates to take actions in dealing with their frustrations and negative feelings. It empowers inmates to learn how to manage emotions preemptively with proper tools, rather than powerlessly waiting for being disciplined after an infraction occurs.

During the trial, when a participating inmate experiences increasing emotional response, she will inform staff and request use of a self-managing tool listed on her “chill” plan. Staff will provide the inmates with requested resources to an attempt to “chill.” This could include quiet time, music, back-in-cell time or other activities that the inmate has identified as increasing the likelihood of being able to step back and chill out. The Chill Plan will be implemented with on-site staff’s support and suggestions.

The aim of this trial is to examine whether the Chill Plan results in a reduction in misbehaviors by empowering self-management. Using administrative data, the primary outcomes are the numbers of formal and informal misconducts recorded during the 60-day trial period. Secondary outcomes include types of infractions and inmates behavior performance reported by staff in the housing units.

The preliminary results from the Muncy trial indicate that another group of inmates – other than those in the DCC – may be more appropriate to participate, so a new round of tests may take place at Muncy in the near future.

Soothing Sounds – ~~ABOUT TO BEGIN~~ COMPLETED

SCI Benner Township

A trial to examine the effectiveness of noise generators on reducing misbehaviors, reducing violent assaults, and reducing psychiatric crisis will be conducted at SCI Benner Township in units that have both inmates with mental and behavioral issues.

One night of disrupted sleep can lead to one feeling unrefreshed and irritable, while frequent nights of disrupted sleep can impose poor health outcomes, impaired memory and cognitive ability, decreased alertness and productivity, increased stress and agitation and an overall poor quality of life.

Evidence states that “reducing sleep elicits psychotic experiences in non-clinical individuals, and that improving sleep in individuals with psychosis may lessen psychotic experiences. Anxiety and depression consistently arise as (partial) mediators of the sleep and psychosis relationship,” (Reeve, Sheaves & Freeman, 2015).

Better management of inmates’ chronic sleep deprivation is of utmost importance in ensuring the safety of staff and other inmates, and, in the longer run, the safety of our communities, since many inmates will eventually be released back into society.

White noise generators have been a go-to tool for aiding sleep. In simple terms, these sound machines mask out unwanted and disruptive sounds with other specific sounds (Nave, n.d.). It might seem counterintuitive to add noise to an already noisy environment; however, the sound emitted from the generator blends with other background noise, allowing the mind to no longer distinguish specific, disruptive sounds but instead blur all sounds together, which allows inmates the ability to fall asleep quicker and maintain uninterrupted sleep. The National Institution of Safety and Health recommends that noise levels should not exceed 85 decibels for a maximum of 8 hours to reduce the risk of induced hearing loss. This recommendation has been applied to noise machines to prevent damage to infants’ hearing.

For some, the typical static sound of a white noise generator can be more irritating than helpful. However, other sounds such as rain, crickets, and waves crashing can be pleasant and soothing, encouraging a calmer atmosphere in which to fall asleep.

Introducing white noise generators into units housing inmates with behavioral and mental problems may help to drown out the annoying and disruptive sounds during sleeping hours for inmates trying to fall asleep. The soothing sounds can serve as a meditating and mindfulness tool to relax inmates’ anxiety and excessive and disruptive outbursts, resulting in an overall calmer environment. An achieved

tranquil atmosphere can improve inmates' quality of sleep, which may reduce feelings of anxiety and depression, and aggressive behavior. The desired outcome of this trial is for inmates to experience a higher level of satisfaction of sleep quality and amount of sleep, while co-occurring a reduced amount of misconducts.

March 2017