

Incarceration alternatives: A special unit for elderly offenders and offenders with disabilities

*The South Carolina Department of Corrections has attempted to address the increasing numbers and unique problems of special needs offenders by housing elderly offenders and offenders with disabilities in a specialized unit. Specialized units or institutions are one means of addressing the special needs of an increasing number of offenders.*

*The department has been aware of older offenders' increasing numbers and special needs since 1970, when it opened a minimum-security institution designed to be an "old folks' home" for male inmates. Some male inmates with physical disabilities also came to be housed in this institution. With the number of elderly inmates growing, this population was moved to the State Park Correctional Center in 1983.*

*The State Park Correctional Center is a minimum-security facility designed to house more than 400 male and female inmates of all ages. It currently operates a specialized unit for geriatric offenders and offenders with disabilities within the facility. Special needs offenders... The South Carolina Department of Corrections has defined disability to include offenders with physical or intellectual impairment(s) that substantially limit their ability to function independently in the general prison population. According to the definition, inmates classified as having a disability must suffer from at least two of the following limitations:*

- inability to provide self-care
- inability to provide self-direction
- vision, hearing or speech problems
- limited capacity for learning
- social and emotional maladjustment
- limited mobility
- chronic medical problems
- acute medical problems
- a need for close medical supervision

However, inmates with disabilities continue as part of the mainstream population as long as they can function in that environment. They are transferred to the special unit only when they can no longer cope with the normal prison environment.

As well, inmates with disabilities who present greater security concerns can be housed in a special unit in a medium/maximum-security facility. Programming Although housing men with women and young inmates with old can present some problems, it also provides a more normal environment. Staff respect residents' dignity and treat them with respect, referring to them as "Mr." or "Ms." Inmates respond in the same manner.

The atmosphere is low key and informal, but there is a definite structure or routine to daily life. Inmates are required to get up and remain dressed throughout the day, to care for their rooms, and to go to meals, sick call and activities.

Individualized programming is vital because the offenders have diverse interests and abilities. The administrative staff has to be creative in assigning jobs, and often those jobs must be adapted to meet certain inmates' limitations.

However, all inmates work within their medical limitations. Inmates who are 65 or older can retire, but work credits (a way to reduce an offender's sentence) can be earned only by those who have jobs.

Instead of traditional inmate vocational activities, leisure activities that can later be translated into a cottage industry, part-time work or a recreational outlet are emphasized. The inmates are involved in gardening, woodworking, basketry and other crafts. Medical care is provided 24 hours a day and is a very costly component of the specialized unit. The inmates have many health problems requiring medical appointments, hospitalization, medication and therapy.

Death and loss must be dealt with on a daily basis. Aging and the resulting medical difficulties serve as constant reminders of the frailty of life, and the inmates' loss of freedom presents a special challenge in dealing with death and illness. Reintegration into the community Release planning is extremely difficult, since many of the offenders are incapable of holding full-time jobs, which is often a stipulation of parole or probation. Staff are assigned to assist special needs offenders in working toward release and try to modify release criteria to meet the offenders' limitations.

Reintegration into the community is further complicated because elderly offenders often have no family or have lost contact with them and, as a result, have no place to live. They also often have little or no income, since they have not been able to pay into either Social Security or a retirement fund.

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Adapted from J. Anderson and R.D. McGehee, "South Carolina Strives to Treat Elderly and Disabled Offenders," *Corrections Today*, 53, 5 (1991): 124-127.