

Ottumwa Residential Facility Renovation and Expansion Completed

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OTTUMWA — “You wouldn’t recognize the place.”

Donn Bruess, residential manager of the Ottumwa Residential Correctional Facility, said the expansion and remodel of the facility has not only given staff and residents more breathing room, it has expanded what the facility is able to do for its residents.

The biggest improvement, Bruess said, is the addition of 25 beds, now totaling 76 beds. The facility also has new staff offices, four spacious classrooms, a larger dining area and more services for residents.

The building is also LEED-certified (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design). There is native grass planted around the building and a native flower plot in the back, which the residents work on and harvest seeds from.

Gary Pietz, assistant director of Iowa’s Eighth Judicial District, said that while the building has doubled in size, they expect to see their utilities bill cut in half thanks to its geothermal heat pumps.

Pietz also said while construction on the facility started in October 2010, it has needed to be expanded almost as soon as it opened in 1991. The co-ed facility started out with 51 beds.

“The reason we needed to add beds is the waiting list was four to six months, or longer,” Pietz said.

The facility houses offenders of different statuses, including probationers, who come directly from the courts; work releasees, who are coming out of prison and are placed in the facility to get stabilized in the community they’re returning to; OWI offenders who are sentenced to the OWI continuum; and federal offenders.



More Beds, Classrooms, and Services

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Donn Bruess

Residential Manager

“Ninety-five percent of offenders that go to prison come back to the communities,” Pietz said. “The only people that may not return are those serving life sentences. The bulk of folks come back out into the community and that’s really what we’re here for, is to help get them stabilized.”

The Iowa Department of Corrections has continued to battle overcrowding in the state’s prisons.

As of Wednesday, there were 8,282 incarcerated inmates in the state, which means the prisons and correctional facilities are overcrowded by 15 percent, according to the Iowa Department of Corrections.

“We’ve absorbed a lot of those folks coming out of the institutions, so that increases waiting lists at residential facilities and increases case loads for our staff and field services,” Pietz said.

Bruess said the biggest issue for the vast majority of the residents is employment, with some also needing substance abuse treatment.

“We want to get them stabilized, get them working, get them in treatment so they’re not using drugs and alcohol and get them back out in the community so they can be productive,” Bruess said.

Yet another incentive to find employment is that unemployed residents live in four-person rooms, whereas employed residents live in two-person rooms.

One of the ways the facility helps its residents is by working with Indian Hills Community College to provide job skills training, including resumes, interview skills, filling out applications and assessing reading, writing and math skills.

The facility has worked to implement some of the Ottumwa IowaWORKS Center’s programs. There are also two computers in the facility’s lobby so residents can look for jobs online.

Bruess said one example of a success story of the facility is a former resident, Leah Kemp, who is now an AmeriCorps domestic violence prevention volunteer, working at the facility for about a month.

“Another individual who was here in the early ’90s is big right now in the substance abuse recovery community,” Bruess said. “We hope to get outside [Alcoholics Anonymous] meetings started here in the very near future.”

This is another big upgrade for the facility, since with four new classrooms, they are able to host AA and substance abuse recovery meetings, which will be open to the public.

On average, residents stay at the facility between 90 and 100 days, though there are exceptions once in awhile if a resident is meeting the program goals or making progress toward becoming independent and following rules and laws, Pietz said.

“We’re not designed for long-term stays at these facilities. It’s to get them stabilized and get them back into the communities where they can use the skills they’re learning,” Pietz said. “Though we’ve had people here who don’t move through as quickly as we’d like, that’s atypical.”

Typically, the facility sees an 80 percent or higher success rate.

“The majority of people who come through the facility, they never give us any trouble,” Bruess said. “A lot of them, they just need a little extra guidance and supervision, and that’s what we’re here for, is that structure.”

An open house will be held for the public to tour the recently expanded and remodeled facility:

10 a.m. Wednesday, Aug. 15

245 Osage Drive

Lunch provided following program and tour