

Unannounced Jail Inspection Report – 1/25/25

Performed by Bethany Hallam & MAN-E

Allegheny County Jail Oversight Board

Introduction

On January 25, 2025, Bethany Hallam and MAN-E conducted an unannounced inspection of the Allegheny County Jail (ACJ) to assess conditions and address concerns raised by incarcerated individuals. We arrived at the facility at approximately 2:20 PM and were greeted by Captain Tyrus Winstead at approximately 2:35 PM, who escorted us during the visit.

During our inspection, we encountered multiple concerning issues, including medical neglect, inadequate access to basic needs, improper use of force and weapons by staff, issues with grievance processes, and systemic failures in maintaining humane conditions. This report documents our findings.

Obstruction of Oversight Access

Upon arrival, Captain Winstead led us to a conference room near the administrative offices and refused to escort us unless MAN-E provided his full government name and photo identification. This demand was inconsistent with past inspections and the rights granted under the Jail Oversight Board's statutory authority. Despite acknowledging that he knew MAN-E and recognized him as a Jail Oversight Board member, he repeatedly threatened to deny entry. This level of obstruction was unprecedented and inconsistent with how other board members are treated.

Additionally, once in this conference room we were required to provide a list of names of individuals we wished to speak with, which has never been a requirement in past visits. When our visit concluded, instead of being allowed to exit as usual, we were again forced into a separate conference room to meet with another captain. These obstructions represent apparent attempts to limit oversight within the jail.

Medical Neglect & Grievance Failures

We spoke with multiple incarcerated individuals who raised serious concerns about medical neglect. In Unit 5E, one individual required surgery for facial injuries and was scheduled to see a periodontist but was never taken to any of his medical appointments. He expressed concern that the delay could lead to long-term damage. Another individual in the same unit had knee surgery but was denied the walker he was prescribed. He has since suffered worsening complications and has been denied further physical therapy than the two appointments he received when he was first transferred to general population from the medical pod. This individual reports his grievances have remained "under review" for months without resolution.

On Unit 4D, an individual with a fractured back requiring physical therapy and a back brace reported that he was only given two therapy sessions in September 2024 before being completely denied further treatment. Another individual prescribed a cardiac diet reported that every meal consisted only of ground meat, applesauce, and peaches, with no variation. Several incarcerated individuals also reported that their sick call requests were ignored, leaving them without access to medical treatment for serious conditions.

On Unit 3D, multiple individuals reported that the grievance process is effectively nonfunctional. Grievances are often ignored or left unresolved for months. Many people do not know the entire grievance process, making it impossible to escalate concerns formally. We suggest the addition of a “grievance how-to” on the tablets.

Improper Use of Force & Intimidation by Staff

While walking past Unit 4B, we encountered Sergeant Sarver wearing a standard sergeant uniform but carrying a shotgun-style “delivery system” in the pod’s sally port. When questioned about why he was armed in this way, he refused to answer, stating, “It’s none of your business.” He then accused us of causing the need for such weapons by banning OC spray (pepper spray) and walked away dismissively.

Later, we interviewed an individual, Mr. Porter, who gave his permission to be recognized in this report. He is housed on Unit 3D, and reported that after he issued a notice of a lawsuit against Sergeant Sarver and CO Fierro, he was retaliated against. He reports Sarver strip-searched him in full view of others, falsely accused him of possessing K2 (synthetic marijuana), and placed him in solitary confinement. While in solitary, he reported Sgt. Sarver shot him with projectiles while he was asleep in his cell. After the assault, Mr. Porter alleges he was further beaten and later taunted by staff. He reported his concerns to a captain on the pod (later identified as Captain Winstead), who responded, “Maybe you deserved it.”

This account suggests a pattern of retaliation and physical abuse by correctional officers, particularly Sgt. Sarver, which warrants immediate investigation.

Failure to Provide Basic Necessities

Many individuals reported issues with inadequate heating throughout the facility. In Unit 4D, cells 128 and 110 were reported to be freezing. Upon entering these cells, we confirmed the drastic temperature drop inside compared to outside the cells in the general pod area. In Unit 3D, incarcerated individuals reported that everyone was supposed to have three blankets, but nobody had them. The heat in cells remained inadequate. Despite previous orders from Warden Wingard to clear the coldest corner cells, this directive had not been followed on all the power visiting, especially 4D.

Sanitation and maintenance issues were also prevalent. In Unit 4D, Cell 217’s sink was not draining correctly, making it unusable. On Unit 3D, incarcerated individuals complained about low water pressure in their cells and stated that their supply of toilet paper was insufficient.

Communication barriers also emerged as a significant issue. In Unit 4A, which serves as an intake pod, new arrivals do not receive tablets over the weekend due to GTL not being on-site, limiting their ability to file grievances, request medical care, or contact loved ones. Additionally, individuals raised concerns about the IWF \$125 stipend survey, which was challenging to find on their tablets. The survey asked, "What would you do with \$125 per month?" and "Is there another improvement or project that you believe the IWF (Inmate Welfare Fund) should be dedicated to?" The placement and accessibility of the survey raise concerns about whether all incarcerated individuals are genuinely able to provide informed feedback.

Religious Discrimination

An individual practicing Islam reported that the Allegheny County Jail does not recognize the December Fast for the Last Foundation of Islam, despite it being recognized in Department of Corrections (DOC) facilities. Another individual expressed concern about his inability to go to Catholic mass, especially on Christmas Day. These inconsistencies raise concerns about religious discrimination and the failure to accommodate faith-based practices.

Conclusion

This inspection revealed ongoing and severe issues within the Allegheny County Jail, including obstruction of oversight access, medical neglect, use of force and staff misconduct, failure to provide basic necessities, grievance system failures, and religious discrimination. Incarcerated individuals are being denied necessary medical care, including post-surgical treatment and specialized medical diets. There are repeated accounts of excessive force and retaliation by staff, particularly Sergeant Sarver, which require immediate investigation.

Basic living conditions remain inadequate, with heating issues, lack of access to blankets, insufficient sanitation, and poor access to communication resources. The grievance process is failing to provide incarcerated individuals with a means of addressing serious concerns, and religious accommodations are inconsistently applied.

Despite these serious concerns, we appreciate Warden Wingard's willingness to work with the Jail Oversight Board to address these issues. His past orders to improve conditions, such as clearing freezing corner cells and distributing extra blankets, demonstrate an acknowledgment of the problems within the facility. However, the failure to fully implement these directives highlights ongoing barriers to meaningful reform. We urge continued collaboration with the Warden and his administration to ensure necessary changes are enforced and that incarcerated individuals receive humane treatment.

Failure to address these systemic issues will continue to endanger the health, safety, and rights of those incarcerated at ACJ. We urge the Jail Oversight Board to take immediate action to hold ACJ accountable and implement necessary reforms.

Submitted by:

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