Creating Family-Friendly Correctional Spaces

By Lindsey Coulter

A study published in the Journal of Health and Social Behavior in September 2014 has reignited discussion about how parental incarceration impacts children. The study, “Stress Proliferation across Generations? Examining the Relationship between Parental Incarceration and Childhood Health,” authored by researchers from the University of California, Irvine, added to a wealth of previous research that suggests parental incarceration has significant intergenerational health consequences. This most recent study linked parental incarceration with learning disabilities, behavioral disorders, developmental delays and even speech and language challenges.

Though methods such as video visitation can help make visits more accessible to an inmate’s family, contact visitation areas still largely take place in spaces designed for security and durability, with neutral colors, hard surfaces, institutional finishes and tables affixed to the floor. However, more and more facilities are starting to recognize the importance of a family-friendly environment, including the California Department of Corrections’ new Health Care Facility in Stockton, Calif.

Correctional News asked several design professionals and one child advocate how smart, sensitive correctional design might help mitigate the negative impacts of parental incarceration and facilitate better visitation. Meg Bower, LEED AP, AICP, a facilities planner with Dewberry; Jeff Goodale, ACA, global justice director at HOK; and Paul Nagashima, AIA, LEED AP, senior project designer with HDR, were eager to speak about the increasing interest in providing more comfortable, family-friendly visitation areas and the role designers can play in promoting healthy parent-child interaction in correctional settings.

Shellie Solomon, managing director for the Service Network for Children of Inmates and president of Children of Inmates Inc., a Florida-based nonprofit that provides prison bonding trips for children of inmates to build long-term relationships with their incarcerated parents, also shared her unique perspective.

Q: How can well-designed, less intimidating family visitation areas benefit inmates and families?

Bower: At a minimum, less intimidating visitation areas can reduce a child’s stress at visiting their parent in...
prison — an inherently stressful experience. It may also lead to more frequent visits if the benefits to the child can be seen to outweigh the negatives. Studies have shown that improving the mother-child bond has a positive effect on mothers post-incarceration, especially when coupled with parenting classes, and that it serves as a strong motivator to succeed after release. Preliminary research also suggests it leads to more stable families immediately following the mother’s return.

Solomon: Less intimidating visitation areas can put children at ease and allow them to disconnect from trying to understand the realities of their parents or caregivers being held in prison. On our first visit to a correctional facility, we learned the importance of environmental factors the hard way. Grandparents had taken their grandchildren to see their incarcerated parents, but didn’t tell the children where they were going. While waiting outside the facility, a 10-year-old boy asked our staff members, “Where are we? They must keep mean animals in there.” Seconds later, he saw his parent behind the fence walking into the visitation center to wait for him to enter.

**Q:** Do most facility owners value establishing visitation areas that are conducive to building/maintaining family bonds?

**Goodale:** More and more facility owners are embracing family-oriented visitation because they recognize the benefits of introducing normalized interaction on the inside of the facility, which makes this environment more effective on the outside. These are not expensive facilities, but do require a different kind of staffing and operations.

**Bower:** Most state systems understand the benefits of encouraging a family bond, but whether or not they have the policies in place and a budget to construct a new space for this purpose are separate issues. Many of the prisons around the country were designed before this was a priority, and state policies on family/child visits vary widely.

**Solomon:** We work with a state agency struggling to support basic correctional requirements. Under this constraint, we’ve been impressed with their attempts to make the best situation possible for our child-focused visitation. However, correctional operations hold security paramount, as appropriate. Within this framework, they sometimes struggle with how to creatively establish

**Q:** What design elements and materials are generally included in family specific visitation spaces?

**Bower:** A “good” plan or design for family visitation should strive to reduce stress on the child and offer a chance for normalized interaction so that the parent-child bond is strengthened through the visit. We always try to keep visitation as close as possible to the facility entrance and public lobby, so children are minimally exposed to the “institutional” feel of the facility.

We make the room feel like a typical place a child would spend time with a parent, such as a living room, and use appropriate scale of space, lighting, furnishings and colors.

We limit the bleed of institutional noise through sound dampening and use concealed cameras and one-way windows with blinds so visits can be monitored discreetly.

We encourage healthy interaction between the parent and child by giving them something to do. A bookshelf and toys with a varying range of interest is a typical detail we specify.

We also give the parent the opportu-
nity to provide for the child’s needs during the visit, often planning space for a mini fridge (stocked by the facility), diaper change area and toilet room.

**Goodale:** The concept of facilities that promote family visitation or reunification is gaining traction because of their demonstrated benefits for inmates and families. The best of these strive to have a normalized environment, where security measures are either hidden or not overt and include color variety, natural daylight, comfortable furnishings and finishes, and perhaps toys and even a nursery-like environment that accommodates mothers and small children. We use colorful and softer though durable materials to make these facilities more warm and friendly: wood doors as opposed to steel, carpet and resilient base as opposed to sealed floors, and commercial ceilings and furniture as opposed to harder institutional varieties.

**Nagashima:** As designers, we can provide less institutional finishes, add color and incorporate good acoustics that are appropriate for visiting and conversation without impacting safety/security. Other things, such as bringing in natural light, and providing outdoor and play areas, can be effective, but take more care to incorporate without impacting safety/security. Our charge is to strike a balance between creating as normal an environment as possible, while maintaining a safe, secure space.

**Solomon:** Despite a limited ability to change the visitation area, our program partners bring in temporary decorations and change the room layouts to make the environment more welcoming. Our use of colorful baby mats, inexpensive table clothes and other portable decorations helps reframe the prison environment. Further, we worked with the correctional facilities to allow families to sit on the floor, walk around and reconfigure their seating arrangements, which have improved family bonding and removed the starkness of correctional facilities.

**Q:** Can you speak about some innovation and effective family visitation spaces that you have worked on?

**Bower:** I’m currently working with the Manitoba Infrastructure and Transportation group planning a new facility in Canada. Their family visitation area is coupled with spiritual care for First Nations and aboriginal inmates. This space will allow families to hold simple ceremonies with up to eight people. The result is an opportunity for inmates to continue to participate in major life events with a bigger group of extended family, which is considered very important in that system.

The “mother and baby” unit at the women’s prison in York, Neb., will always be one of my favorites. This program includes a special unit where mothers can live with their infants for a period of time to allow them to bond. There are other units around the country and even a whole prison in California that do this, but this one is intimate and has a wonderful atmosphere.

**Goodale:** Projects we’re designing in California’s San Mateo and Stanislaus Counties have a lot of promise. They include contact visitation and family reunification areas, with mother-child bonding opportunities and group settings that will promote healing and families coming together.

**Nagashima:** The California Department of Corrections’ and Rehabilitation project, the California Health Care Facility in Stockton, is a good example as it offers two distinct visitation spaces; one general visitation area with a raised officer station and non-contact booths, and one Family Visiting Unit with a kitchen and dining area.