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Photo Credit: [all], Dewberry

## Tulsa County Jail Makes Mental Health A Priority

By Lindsey Coulter

As jail and prison populations age, and experience demographic changes, the need for dedicated mental health housing and services has become more and more apparent. Tulsa County, Okla., in particular has experienced an uptick in the number of inmates requiring mental health services, and is constructing two new mental-health housing pods to better manage this unique population. New general population housing will also be added to expand the jail's original 1,650-inmate capacity, which is often exceeded by 160 beds.

Construction began on an expansion to the 43,000-square-foot Tulsa County Jail — previously the David L. Moss Criminal Justice Center — in May after an April groundbreaking ceremony. The project required a year of design work by Dewberry's Tulsa office, which has previously worked with the county and was established in 1962. Richard Davidson, AIA, justice architecture segment leader, served as the project lead, with support from Jeff Purtell, justice architecture business development director.

### Pod Design

"There's two pieces to the project.

There is a mental health pod that has two housing units — a close watch unit and a transitional unit that is strictly for mental health — and a minimum-security general population housing unit," Davidson explained.

This two-pronged housing approach will allow the county to better segregate those inmates who, from a classification standpoint, can be adequately served with hard bed cells from those that require a different level of security. "This is a way of actually making the facility much more efficient overall," Davidson added.

The 98-bed, mental health portion of the project will comprise a two-unit housing pod — one with three levels of step down from close watch to supervised watch to single cells. On the other side of that pod, a mental health transitional housing dorm will be reserved for inmates who are being regulated in anticipation of transitioning back into general population housing.

Davidson noted that the project's impact on the overall facility will be considerable, as the jail currently offers no specialized mental health housing. "It's a facility that had approximately 1,400 beds already, so this [project will have a] fairly significant impact to overall operations," Davidson said. "[They will have] housing that is specialized for mental health with the right kind of cells and the right kind of suicide prevention devices that accommodate people who are at risk."

The layout of the overall mental health space is a bit different from the general population areas as well. The unit is all one level, lacking the mezzanine level found in other housing units. This means Dewberry's design actually lowered the inmate cell areas while raising the center portion of the building to provide a more protected seal. The center portion includes clerestory lighting.

"One primary issue in terms of the therapeutic environment is the introduction of daylight. We have much more

daylighting than we have in any of the existing housing units," Davidson added.

Lifting the center portion of the facility and adding the clerestory will also have acoustical benefits and help control sound levels. "Essentially, what we've attempted to do with the design is to — from a materials standpoint — provide a de-stressed environment as much as possible," Davidson said. "But at the same time, it's not carpet and it's not a soft floor; it's an area that takes quite a beating."

Slightly different from the mental health housing unit, the transitional unit will be very interactive, operating purely on the direct-supervision model with treatment and breakout areas for counseling with trained staff. Between the two units is a mental health treatment area both for the mental health pod inmates and those undergoing treatment for mental issues throughout the facility. While not specifically labeled a clinic, the area will include exam and observation rooms.

The county had a very tight and specific budget, but still required a variety of bed types. Despite the financial constrictions, Dewberry was able to address both the facility's mental health needs and its low-security general population needs.

"The actual design of the pods comes from working closely with [county] mental health providers," Davidson said. "It was a direct response to what the facility needed, but also from a therapeutic standpoint, the mental health providers thought it was needed as well. It's been one movement together from day one."

Sheriff's department officials participated from the earliest days of programming and visited a number of similar facilities to learn what worked and what didn't. The visits also gave the county's correctional and justice staff an opportunity to talk best practices with other jail mental health care providers.

This approach was one Dewberry highly supported, according to Purtell.

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Providing dedicated and supportive mental-health housing in general falls in line with the company's mission and values.

"The community was very supportive, too," Purtell noted. "This [project] passed by referendum, and the community recognized the need to provide this type of specialized housing."

**Safety & Sustainability**

Due to the nature of the mental health housing units, safety will be ensured through the standard security cameras and devices but also through varying levels of staff interaction and oversight. The units will offer a hybrid design in which officers are present in the dayroom in a direct supervision manner, but secure workstations will also be included.

"There are zones of security in the close watch area that have permanent observation stations, so there is a very strong direct linkage between a few cells and a staff person. There is kind of a heightened sense of direct observation and the staff ratios have been greatly reduced," Davidson said.

Aside from providing ample daylighting and reducing lighting-related energy needs, Dewberry is also looking at the facility's long-term sustainability needs, and is engaged in a process of design with its energy solutions group to look at ways to make the jail's mechanical electrical systems more efficient.

"[Sustainability] is kind of outside of the scope of the first units and pods, it's an ongoing [process of] looking at the overall facility," Davidson explained. "We're designing now from an energy and sustainability standpoint, then will come back and retrofit where we can in the future."

**Project Challenges**

The project's primary challenges lay in the need to minimally impact the jail's ongoing daily operations, while also ensuring a fast-track completion. The two goals seem to work against each other, but Dewberry's flexibility and innovative approach are helping to ensure a smooth construction process, anticipated to wrap up in late 2016.

"There was a fairly extensive, very fast-paced early initiation phase. One of the very first things we did was look at ways we might add housing onto the building in such a way that we had very little impact on the overall facility in terms of getting it built, in terms of circulation and in terms of taking anything of-line," Davidson said. "We did numerous schemes and looked at what would give us the lowest impact because that impact also drove costs. As soon as we honed in on our program in terms of the number of beds, we immediately began to look at where we could plug these additions on and what made the most sense."

While this painstaking programming process undoubtedly improved the project, it was also highly necessary. As with most correctional construction projects,

finances were a major concern. The project's \$9.3 million budget was dictated by a public referendum, and the project team needed to make the most of the available funding. Meanwhile, Dewberry also had to consider how to make the best use of existing resources, utilities and energy systems while addressing the facility's most pressing needs.

Ultimately, through that exercise,

Dewberry found the two options that were the most cost effective and had the least amount of impact to daily operations — both in terms of taking the building offline and bringing construction vehicles into the facility. With the project construction manager, locally based Manhattan Construction, Dewberry developed a series of bid packages that could best support the speed of the project. Once those were de-

termined, Dewberry started figuring out how to design around those packages to facilitate the shortest schedule possible.

"Those were the largest challenges. We needed to do a fast-track because the shorter we could make the schedule and get everything online the overall construction costs would be less and we'd be disrupting things as minimally as we could," Davidson said. ■



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