



## Third Report from Bridewell

By Frank Cordaro

October 21, 2007

### We Build Them. We'll Fill Them.

Polk County (along with most county jails in Iowa) has had an over-crowding problem for years. I remember Blessed Bishop Dingman leading the community call to build a new eight-floor jail in the 1970s. I also remember we Catholic Workers disagreed with the good Bishop on that call. (This was one of a few times we've disagreed with Dingman.)

We told the Bishop that if we built it, we would fill it. Catholic Workers believed that what we needed were more community-based correctional options. This was before the national move away from a rehabilitation-driven prison system to one that is strictly punishment-based. It was also before Ronald Reagan's war on drugs and the national push for mandatory sentences.

Thirty years later, the war on drugs has been lost; our justice protections have been gutted; and we have a prison population that is exploding. (In fact, the prison system is one of a very few growth industries in Iowa.) Local, County, and State governments con-

tinue pouring our limited tax dollars into the bottomless hole of building and maintaining more and more prisons.

It wasn't long after the 1970s that the newly-constructed Polk County Jail was filled to capacity and that the overflow of prisoners was then transferred to other county jails in Iowa. This transferring continued until Polk County figured it made more fiscal sense to add the Annex—an old warehouse located two blocks from the "new" jail that was converted into additional incarceration space. This "fix" didn't last long. Soon, both the new jail and the Annex were overflowing, and inmates

were again being transferred to other county jails. They were, that is, until it was discovered that it was cheaper to transfer overflow prisoners out of state to a private, for-profit prison in Pattonsburg, Missouri. The decision was such a hit that the Polk County Land and Leasing Group (LLC) built another for-profit prison in 2004 in Bethany, Missouri.

My short stay in the Polk County jail lasted for just two nights. On Sunday, October 7, I was loaded into a van with eleven other inmates and driven

to Bethany, Missouri, and the Bridewell Detention Facility ([www.bridewelldetention.com](http://www.bridewelldetention.com)). An hour and a half out of Des Moines, we were in Bridewell's Receiving and Delivery Unit, where we were issued a new set of jail clothes, reporting to medical staff, and assigned to a pod and bunk. I was assigned, then taken to Pod Two, Bunk 80.

*On October 5, 2007, peace-maker Frank Cordaro was sentenced to 30 days in jail for the criminal trespass charge that came from his participation in an occupation of Senator Charles Grassley's office on September 21. He joined an effort led by Iowa high school students who are members of the group, Students beyond War.*

*After being taken into custody, Cordaro was transferred to the Bridewell Detention Center in Bethany, Missouri, where he is serving his sentence. This is his third report from there.*

I've spent time in many county jails through the years. They are all fundamentally warehouses for human beings. Phil Berrigan used to call them "human dust bins." Some are certainly better than others. None of them are good.

There are no educational programs, no inmate work assignments (except for trustees), little or no outdoor access or exercise space, limited religious services, and paltry libraries or access to reading materials. The food is always poor and nutritionally inadequate. People are just stored in very small, crowded paces—locked down, out-of-sight from the rest of society.

I would rate the Bridewell Detention Facility on the high end of incarceration facilities. A large, metal-framed, steel building, it doesn't look like your typical jail. It sits just off Interstate 35 on the north side of Bethany in an industrial zone. The facility has four separate wings called "Pods" in which most inmates are placed. Inmates can also be held in the "Hole" (or the disciplinary cells) and lately in the recreation room, a place for the overflow of inmates that Bridewell, too, is experiencing.

Each Pod has 32 steel, two-tiered bunk beds and holds 64 inmates. Pod Two is 80-by-20-feet with a 20-foot ceiling. There is a wall-mounted television and eight steel tables with benches. Each table seats eight. There is a row of eight urinals and two toilets along the wall in one corner and six showers along the other wall in the same corner. There is a bank of ten sinks that also serves as a four-foot partition wall for the showers and toilets. There are two telephone polls with four phones on each. Each Pod has a door that leads to an outdoor 20-by-40-foot smoking area. There is an Officers' Station in each Pod.

What first impressed me was the Pod's cleanliness. Each Pod is well-lighted, and, with its high ceiling, you don't experience the claustrophobia that usually comes with time in jail. Bridewell provides plenty of clothing, i.e. you get three clothing changes per week and a weekly bedding change. Toilet paper and cleaning materials are replenished promptly.

The food earns a poor rating (as it does in all jails). The meat is the poorest quality. There is far too much starch in the diet, and nearly everything comes in a can. The dietary highlight of the day is the banana or orange served at breakfast.

Those who receive money from home (not all inmates do) can also buy things at the Jail Commissary. The Commissary list is very limited, and there are no healthy food items on it. It's also very expensive. A three-ounce bag of Ramen Noodles is \$.75 and a stamped-envelope is \$.60. This routine pricing for jail commissaries is also a way to unfairly tax or punish low-income families who send money for these items to inmates—families who've done nothing wrong but care about someone in jail. Someone is making a lot of money off of their love. One good thing, however, about the Bridewell Commissary is that inmates may place orders seven days a week, and their orders are filled the following day.

The biggest plus—for most inmates—that Bridewell offers are its liberal smoking privileges. Inmates are permitted smoke breaks every two hours between 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. Since many facilities don't allow smoking at all (and while I don't smoke, at least 80% do), the privilege is quite appreciated. Add to this the cable television (of course the only way to broad-

cast television inside any facility is through a cable system), and daily movies (sadly the most popular films are also the most violent); a lot of guys are doing rather well here.

The inmate-friendly policies, however, are not driven by concern for the inmates. The motivation for these "liberal" policies is to create a safer and more efficient environment for the guards. A distracted and less-agitated inmate population is easier to manage.

I am most impressed here by how well the guards interact with inmates. They are friendly, professional, and always pleasant. At least one guard is present in the Pods at all times. Usually, though, there are more, especially at meal times, during head counts, and when clothing and bedding are exchanged. There is always at least one guard on-duty in the smoke break area. Since most of the guards are smokers, this duty seems to have mutual benefit.

If there is any sign of trouble, support guards are always on-hand to assist the guard assigned to the Pod. So, far their tactics to maintain order are effective without being Draconian. Very impressive.

There are downsides to being held at Bridewell. It is 75 miles from Polk County, and the distance makes it harder for inmates to stay connected to their families and support. It's far more difficult to do legal work for one's case or to have access to attorneys from here. Making the trip to visit is hardly worth the effort, since the maximum length permitted for a visit is twenty minutes and can be limited to as few as ten minutes. This means a visitor would usually spend between two and three hours on the road to spend a few minutes talking to someone on the phone through a plate glass window.

Not that the option of making phone calls to home is a financially feasible one for many. The cost for phone calls (which is typical of most jails and prisons) can be called immorally obscene. It costs a dollar per minute to place a collect call (another way to burden families who are already financially stressed). Phone cards may also be purchased through the commissary at the "bargain" price of fifty cents per minute.

The comprehensive downside of it all for Polk County is all about the money it's costing all of us. At it stands now, Polk County is filling its own jail, its Annex, the two for-profit centers in Missouri, and still farming out inmates to other jails as well. The County's present solution to the problem is the soon-to-be-completed and second "new" jail on the north side of Des Moines.

Despite all the promises and hype made about the new jail, we in the Catholic Worker community still maintain, "We build them. We'll fill them."

---

*You can donate to a fund for fees for those arrested through the Iowa Peace Network at the link below:*

[www.iowapeacenetwork.org](http://www.iowapeacenetwork.org)

*Or you can make donations to the Des Moines Catholic Worker at:*

[www.desmoinescatholicworker.org](http://www.desmoinescatholicworker.org)

*Updates on the Iowa Occupation Project can be found on the web page:*

[www.schoolformoralcourage.com/iowaoccupationproject.html](http://www.schoolformoralcourage.com/iowaoccupationproject.html)

*Information about SODaPOP:*

[www.desmoinescatholicworker.org/sodapop.html](http://www.desmoinescatholicworker.org/sodapop.html)