

2003-2004 SANTA CLARA COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY

INQUIRY INTO SHORTAGES IN THE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION INMATE PERSONAL FUND

Summary

The 2003-2004 Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) inquired into the inability of the Department of Correction (Department) to reconcile the balance of the amounts due inmates with the balance in the Inmate Personal Fund. The County Auditor indicated the accounts had never been reconciled to the Santa Clara County's (County) books; it would take up to six months to reconcile the difference; and the reconciliation will probably show a shortage in the fund balance in the \$90,000 range. The County would have to make up the difference in order to balance the accounts. The Grand Jury was unable to find an explanation for the causes other than errors made by Department personnel. The Grand Jury agreed with the County Auditor that the best course of action was to stop attempts at reconciliation of old handwritten records and write off the outstanding difference.

Background and Discussion

When an inmate is booked into the County jail system, an account is immediately established for the inmate and any funds on the inmate at that time are deposited to his/her account. Other deposits may be made from time to time by the inmate, relatives and friends. The inmate may order items from the commissary (shaving cream, tooth paste, etc.) and the cost of these items is deducted from the account. Upon discharge, the inmate is given a check for the balance in his account. Until three years ago, these accounts were kept by hand and seldom reconciled.

There are a number of deputies involved in the booking process of inmates. One step in the procedure is the surrendering of all valuables, including cash, a process that involves two officers and the inmate. The deputies inventory these items and then sign a receipt that is also signed by the inmate. Often the inmate is intoxicated or high on drugs that may affect their mental processes.

Three years ago, the Department of Correction shifted to a computerized program provided by the commissary vendor. Since that time the receipts, dispersals and payments have been in balance. The Department of Correction has now started a long and laborious process of going back through at least eight years of handwritten records to try to balance the old funds that are out of balance by about \$90,000. While this is a sizable amount, it appears many former inmates have not cashed their checks; the amount of outstanding checks actually exceeds the \$90,000 that the accounts are out of balance and the outstanding checks can be used to balance the fund.

The Grand Jury is not worried about future charges and withdrawals to this account. The computerized program plus a policy of frequent audits should maintain correct balances in these accounts in the future.

Finding I

The Department of Correction is spending an inordinate amount of time in trying to reconcile old and possibly incorrect and incomplete records to balance the Inmate Personal Fund; the County Auditor feels such a reconciliation will never happen.

Recommendation I A

The Department should stop attempting to reconcile old records and ask the Board of Supervisors' Finance Committee to "write off" any unreconciled balance against outstanding checks.

Recommendation I B

The County Finance Agency should reconcile this account to the Inmate Personal Fund Account at least quarterly.

Finding II

The present software used by the Department of Correction for the Inmate Personal Fund is provided by the commissary company currently servicing the Department. Whenever the commissary company is changed, a new software program will be instituted, which requires adapting the program to County records and extensive training of personnel.

Recommendation II

The Department should purchase or lease its own software program that meets the specific needs of the Inmate Personal Fund.

PASSED and **ADOPTED** by the Santa Clara County Civil Grand Jury on this 8th day of April 2004.

Richard H. Woodward
Foreperson

References

Documents

Santa Clara County Department of Correction Custody Audit, as of June 30, 2002.

Miscellaneous documents used in booking of inmates and safekeeping of valuables.

Interviews

Staff at Elmwood Correctional Center, August 18, 2003.

Interview at Department of Correction Accounting Office, February 5, 2004.

Interview with Santa Clara County Auditor, March 22, 2004.

Frequent telephone conversations with staff in the above offices.