

## **Now in Business: Handicapped Accessible Prison: State opens first prison for disabled**

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OKLAHOMA CITY -- Department of Corrections officials this week began moving several of the state's disabled inmates into Oklahoma's first handicapped-accessible prison unit.

The federally funded unit at Joseph Harp Correctional Facility near Lexington will house 262 prisoners. The DOC plans to move in 40 inmates each week until the facility is full.

Dubbed the "ADA facility" because of its compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, the unit is accessible for inmates who use wheelchairs and those who are visually impaired.

"We will fill it up extremely quickly," said Justin Jones, DOC director. The state currently has enough inmates who use wheelchairs to fill the unit, he said.

However, the facility also will house inmates being treated for cancer, on dialysis or recovering from major surgeries, Jones said. The prison unit also will accommodate offenders with dementia or those who are in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease.

Inmates will be trained to work as orderlies in the facility, providing services such as cleaning bedpans and lifting patients, Jones said.

Although the facility was constructed using federal funds, it will be operated using state money. The DOC's 2008 budget calls for \$1.4 million to operate and staff the facility.

The unit is contained in a secure, separate single-story building on the prison grounds.

Its shower stalls and restrooms are designed to accommodate wheelchairs.

The majority of the unit's beds are contained in an "open-bay" area. However, 32 large cells will house four offenders each and are large enough to accommodate medical equipment, such as oxygen tanks.

Each cell also has two buttons that offenders can use to call for emergency help.

The unit has a secure medication room, an exam room, and is ambulance accessible.

A dozen orderlies will live in the facility, said Debbie Dorris, the warden's assistant at Joseph Harp Correctional Center. The orderlies will receive special training to help care for the inmates, she said.

They will not be able to access medications or medical equipment such as syringes, needles or surgical instruments, according to the DOC.

Inmates will be transferred to the facility from across the state, Dorris said.

The new unit comes as the DOC faces crisis-level overcrowding in its prisons. Oklahoma's prison population also is aging, an effect, some say, of tough-on-crime policies enacted and a requirement that certain offenders serve 85 percent of their sentences before being eligible for parole.

In the past 15 years, the average age of Oklahoma's prisoners has risen from 32 years to nearly 37 years old, according to the Oklahoma Criminal Justice Resource Center.

The number of inmates 45 or older has quadrupled since 1990, while the total prison population has nearly doubled, according to the OCJRC



Prison cells line the wall at a new facility at Joseph Harp Correctional Center near Lexington that complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The facility will be more accessible for inmates in wheelchairs or who are visually impaired.

TY RUSSELL for the Tulsa World



The majority of the beds in a new unit at Joseph Harp Correctional Center near Lexington are contained in an "open-bay" area. In addition to disabled prisoners, the facility will house inmates being treated for cancer, on dialysis or recovering from major surgeries, officials said.