

Suicide on the Inside

Law Enforcement Officials Blame Jail Conditions for High Attempted Suicide Rates

By Jeff Hinkle

DANNY DANIELS HAD BEEN drinking the night he was arrested, so the cops at the Blackfeet tribal jail decided the drunk tank was the appropriate place to let him sleep it off. Daniels was not a regular face at the jail nor was drunkenness the only charge against him.

The 45-year-old Chippewa-Cree, who lived on the Montana reservation, had been booked the night of July 27, 1997 because he had allegedly gotten into a fight with his mother's boyfriend. It was unclear who started the brawl or what the fight was about, but the outcome was irrefutable. Daniels went to jail while the boyfriend was airlifted to a hospital in nearby Missoula.

The boyfriend got better. Daniels didn't.

According to authorities, two hours after his arrest, Daniels — the lone occupant of his cell — was found dead in what officials ruled a suicide.

His ex-wife and three daughters believe Blackfeet jail officials neglected Daniels that night and the family is suing the U.S. government — which has ultimate responsibility for what happened in the BIA-owned structure — for negligence and wrongful death.

Attorneys for both sides refused to discuss the case, but last month, lawyers and family members met to discuss an out-of-court settlement. Those discussions continue.

More than two dozen occupants of the Blackfeet tribal jail attempted suicide between July 1, 1997 and June 30, 1998, but Daniels was the only prisoner who completed the chore.

The Blackfeet facility had the highest number of attempted suicides in all of Indian Country during that time period. According to a recent Justice Department report, out of the 133 such attempts nationwide, 26 of them occurred behind the walls of the Blackfeet lock-up. And

Daniels was just one of three "completed" suicides in Indian Country during that time.

Fred Guardipee, who grew up on Blackfeet land and became chief of the tribal police in 1999, estimates that 90 percent of the inmates in his jail are there on alcohol-related charges. Once inside, he says, it's not much of a leap to

time topped a list of BIA jails most in need of replacement — are still equipped with bunk beds. Most modern penal institutions have done away with the contraptions, since they furnish desperate prisoners with makeshift gallows. And the planned new BIA-funded facility never happened because in 1997, Congress turned all new prison construction over to the Justice Department.

The tribe has been managing the jail since 1995 under a 638 contract — an agreement that gives the tribe the right to run the facility, but still allows the BIA the right to inspect the jail.

Late last year the BIA issued a scathing analysis of the site following a September inspection. The report is critical of the facility's poor conditions, inadequate staffing and lack of an "approved policy and procedures manual."

Such out-of-date conditions are not unique to the Blackfeet lock-up, says Walt Lamar, acting director of the BIA's Law Enforcement Division. He says most of the tribal jails in operation are understaffed and out of step with modern times.

Meanwhile, studies show rates of alcoholism, depression and suicide are higher on reservations than the rest of the country. It makes for a

volatile mix.

In the late 1990s, funding for Indian Country law enforcement saw dramatic increases under the Clinton Administration. But in spite of the good intentions and millions of dollars in new money, Lamar says little of that money made its way to the 60-plus tribal jails that fall under the BIA's jurisdiction.

"In 1995, 13 BIA-run jails were condemned; right now 11 of those condemned jails are still in operation. One of those is the Blackfeet jail," he says.

Lamar says cash-strapped tribes have little choice but to rely on the existing facilities. He



A leaky toilet and hole in vent are illustrations of poor conditions at the Blackfeet jail. Photo courtesy of Blackfeet Law Enforcement Services

conclude that the grim conditions of the jail might trigger despondency, which in turn might lead inmates to darker thoughts.

"The place is pretty bad. The building has been condemned three or four times now. It was built in the 1970s. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. The water system breaks down. It's a pretty depressing place. Ninety percent of our inmates are natives and they don't deserve this. It's inhumane."

He believes the dismal and outdated surroundings were a "definite" factor in the facility's high rate of attempted suicides. Many of the cells in the old facility — which at one

is currently appealing to Congress for aid. But until then he believes that these neglected facilities will continue to be breeding grounds for a throng of inmate-related problems — chief among them the threat of suicide.

The numbers support his concern. A 1994 study conducted by the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, entitled American Indian Suicidal Behavior in Detention Environments, reported that although “American Indians represent one percent of [county, city and police] jail population...[but they account for] five percent of jail suicides.”

Another jail that was on that 1995 BIA list of structures destined for the wrecking ball was the Gila River Apache’s Sacaton facility near Chandler, Ariz.

In 1998 — the year the Blackfeet Jail reported 26 suicide attempts — Sacaton had the dubious distinction of tying for second place — along with lock-ups on the Salt River and the Rosebud Reservations — on the list of most attempted suicides among its inmates. Each of those three facilities reported 10 such attempts. Salt River and Rosebud both registered one death each as a result of suicide.

No inmates killed themselves in Sacaton, but things did take a turn for the worse there the following year. Between July 1, 1998 and June 30, 1999, there were a combined 30 bids at suicide in the tribe’s adult and juvenile facilities. Those 30 attempts accounted for close to one-third of the 103 total such attempts reported in Indian Country for the 1998-99 time period.

Perhaps most troubling fact about the figure was that 18 of those attempts occurred in the juvenile facility.

“1998 was our worst year,” recalls Myrtle Charles, assistant director of the Gila River Juvenile Detention. “That’s when we housed 88 kids from two buildings in our old Sacaton building.”

At that time, tribal officials were putting the finishing touches on its new tribal-run Gila River Criminal Justice Building, a structure that today houses Gila River’s new jail, 911-call center and the police offices. The new building was underwritten by the tribe’s casino profits, but until it opened in 1999 both adult and juvenile prison populations were shuffled around in preparation for the move.

That year both adults and minors spent time in the old structure, which Al Henton of the Gila River Department of Corrections, describes as “lacking in security, safety and services. It was a bad situation for both inmates and staff. Like a lot of jails in Indian Country, it was about 20 years behind the times.”

Myrtle says that most of the juvenile suicide attempts that occurred in the old structure were not serious, but she says staff members still treated them as such. “Most were just copycats trying to send a message. A lot of it was self-destructive behavior where kids were trying to get out of the jail and sent to the hospital. It’s better than being in jail.”

Dan Foster, a counselor with the Blackfeet Government Health Services, says threatening suicide to escape jail time is not uncommon in his neck of the woods, either.

“The jail is in pretty bad shape,” says Foster. “So inmates will cut themselves or threaten suicide in an effort to go to the hospital instead. Or kids will talk about suicide because they have no history of being in jail and they’re scared.”

In such cases, jail administrators at both facilities must categorize the sham suicides as “attempts.” They are required to according to the requirements of the 638 agreements.

The new Gila River structure has medical staff on site eight hours a day to step in if necessary. And that’s not all — the shiny new facility has no bunk beds or any protrusions that invite hangings. The structure is also equipped with closed-circuit cameras and added staff.

“It’s state-of-the-art,” says Henton. “At least for Indian Country.”

In the meantime, the dilapidated Blackfeet jail has also installed closed-circuit monitors and a sprinkler system in an attempt to improve security. Those efforts may be helping, as the facility reported no suicide attempts in 1999. □

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