

The Amenities – Smoke and Mirrors

by: Tom Watson, March 23, 2009

For months, nearly every media story covering the California Prison Medical problems, and the Receiver's proposed new construction plans, has devoted some rhetoric to amenities such as yoga rooms, art therapy rooms, bingo rooms, and the like.

Does no one remember the history of how this came about? Does no one remember how these amenities came to be in the construction plans being proposed by Receiver J. Clark Kelso? Does the public truly believe these amenities were Kelso's ideas, or even the ideas of his predecessor Robert Sillen?

Well, they were the idea of neither Kelso nor Sillen. The State of California is again using smoke and mirrors by so inferring. These amenities resulted from the insistence of the Governor's Office in conjunction with the other State agencies involved in the process.

To be fair, it was not the amenities per se which were insisted upon by the State, but rather, it was a particular set of plans which just happened to contain such amenities. The Governor's Office happened to think it could save several million dollars by reusing a set of construction plans California had already paid for to construct the Coalinga State Hospital.

When the California Department of Mental Health ("DMH") received the funding and approval to build its first new facility in more than forty years, the DMH wanted to make it a showplace – a facility which would incorporate all of the latest scientific and professional standards available for mental health treatment. The DMH wanted to build a "state-of-the-art" mental hospital. They were not building a prison, but rather a modern hospital.

To design such a state-of-the-art mental hospital, approximately nine years ago the DMH contracted with a private sector architectural firm that specialized in the design of hospitals. This architectural firm designed a hospital for the DMH based on how they would design a hospital for the general public. To that hospital design, a high security perimeter was added in order to make this state-of-the-art mental hospital a secure facility. However, the interior design was that of a hospital which was designed with the general public in mind. As such, it contained all of the amenities which are now the political fodder of the media and Attorney General Jerry Brown.

According to sources at Coalinga State Hospital ("CSH"), shortly after Kelso was appointed to his position, a large entourage toured CSH. This group included Kelso and some of his staff, officials from the Legislature, the Governor's Office, the Attorney General's Office, the DMH and CDCR. The main purpose of this tour was supposedly to convince Kelso that

major portions, if not all, of the CSH construction plans could be successfully reused by him to construct the proposed prison medical facilities.

And why not? The same set of basic plans has been used successfully for the construction of all the new prisons built in California during the last 20 years, so a standardized hospital plan would also make fiscal sense.

Construction plans generally have room labels, such as kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, family room, dining room, living room, closet, etc. Even in a private home, how many labeled rooms are actually used for their labeled purpose by a particular tenant? For example, a spare bedroom might actually become a home office, a play room, or a sewing room. The same is true with the CSH construction plans. The architectural firm that labeled the rooms picked names that would be popular in a public sector facility. However, these are just arbitrary labels for empty rooms which can be put to any needed use by the present tenant.

Thus, this whole issue is nothing more than smoke and mirrors. What kind of room is used for Yoga? Yoga can be performed in an empty room using no equipment. Would the public who is getting so excited about these amenities labels be happier if they were instead labeled, “Rack Room,” “Thumbscrew Room,” “Water Torture Room,” or the like? The label means nothing. It is unlikely the CDCR is going to have any actual yoga rooms, art therapy rooms, bingo rooms, or torture rooms.

Although there is a great deal of data showing art therapy to have great rehabilitative value, and also data showing present prison methods amount to torture, these are not the subject of this article.

The need to relabel should be apparent. The same basic set of plans which were initially used to construct Coalinga State Hospital is now proposed to be used to construct new prison medical facilities, and also new prison mental health facilities. These are obviously three similar but different facilities, and each will obviously require different room usages and labels.

Simple logic dictates the CDCR is going to relabel the rooms to reflect their actual usage needs. That makes this ridiculous subject nothing more than a diversion tactic being used by California Government Officials. From the time State Officials first began complaining about the alleged amenities problem, they knew, or reasonable should have known, that this issue is political sophistry and a stall tactic. Methods for which they are so well known.

Although it is unlikely, it would be refreshing if California Officials would quit playing games and instead deal with the actual problems facing the State.