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FROM: Shaun Prats
RE: “Better Know a Jail” Memo
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Bridge City Center for Youth

Introduction

Bridge City is a small community of just over 7,000 people, located on the West Bank of the Mississippi River in Jefferson Parish, almost directly under the Huey P. Long Bridge. This community has an area of only 5.24 square miles, which is primarily made up of suburban homes and businesses but is also home to the Avondale Shipyard and the Bridge City Center for Youth (BCCY).¹ In 1961, Our Lady of the River School was opened as a home and convent for hundreds of delinquent and orphaned girls. Then, in 1971, the Louisiana Department of Corrections purchased the 30-acre plot and facility for \$2 million, converting it into a juvenile detention center for boys, now known as the Bridge City Center for Youth.² From the time of its establishment until now, Bridge City residents have strongly opposed the operation of a prison on their doorsteps. Having undergone few, if any, structural or design changes since its time as a convent, the BCCY has posed several consistent risks for those housed within it, those who work in it, and those who live around it.

Facility Characteristics

The Bridge City Center for Youth is a maximum-security secure care facility for juveniles, located at 3225 River Road, Bridge City, Louisiana, 70094.³ Secure care facilities house adjudicated juveniles who are considered a threat to public safety.⁴ As mentioned, Bridge City is primarily a suburban community with an area of just over five square miles. Because of the relatively small size of this community, there is very little distance between its homes, businesses, and other facilities. Simply looking at a map or satellite image of this community reveals that the BCCY sits within only walking distance from the nearest family homes and schools.⁵ In a sense, the BCCY is as much a close part of the Bridge City community as any local school or restaurant would be. As I will discuss later, this close proximity has been the subject of much of the controversy and public safety concerns over the BCCY.

The BCCY houses juvenile males, typically between the ages of 12 and 20, a majority of whom have been adjudicated for violent offenses.⁶ According to the most recent OJJ population report, which covers the fourth quarter of 2021, Jefferson Parish held 21 juveniles in secure custody, 81% of which were African-American and 95% of which were male.⁷ As the BCCY is the only juvenile detention center in Jefferson Parish, these statistics are likely reflected in its specific population, as well.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bridge_City,_Louisiana

² https://www.nola.com/news/article_ef62b03a-0a0b-11ed-b82c-3b58f0451ec9.html

³ <https://ojj.la.gov/about-ojj/administrative-functions/ojj-secure-care-facilities/>

⁴ [https://app.la.state.la.us/publicreports.nsf/0/68508947202a54458625882a0064c0bb/\\$file/000268d7a.pdf?openelement&.7773098](https://app.la.state.la.us/publicreports.nsf/0/68508947202a54458625882a0064c0bb/$file/000268d7a.pdf?openelement&.7773098)

⁵ <https://ojj.la.gov/about-ojj/administrative-functions/ojj-secure-care-facilities/>

⁶ <https://ojj.la.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2021-BCCY-Final-PREA-Audit-Report.pdf>

⁷ <https://ojj.la.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/OJJ-Indicators-2021Q4.pdf> (p.4)

A September 2021 PREA report gives the most complete description of the BCCY's facilities, stating that the custodial sections of the BCCY are made up of 5 open-bay dorms and 3 segregation or isolation cells. Additionally, the facility contains a chapel, classrooms, kitchen and dining facilities, a training area, a medical unit with an infirmary, as well as a gymnasium and pavilion area that is used for recreation, visitation, and programs. The dormitory units contain administration offices, day rooms, bathroom/shower areas, 4 secured desks and chairs, and twelve bunk beds. While capacity statistics fluctuate and conflict depending on the source, the PREA report has listed the facility as having a rated capacity of 84 male youth.⁸ While this conflicts with various other sources which have described a design capacity as high as 136⁹, the official nature of the PREA report allows it to be taken as the most current and reliable bed count available for the facility.

Louisiana's funding of youth services is divided among the OJJ's six different programs: Administration, North Region, Central/Southwest Region, Southeast Region, Contract Services, and Auxiliary. The Southeast Region includes the BCCY, as well as the Regional Offices of New Orleans, Hammond, Baton Rouge, and Thibodeaux. The OJJ receives a certain amount of funding for each of these programs and then may use these funds as needed for that program. For the 2020-21 fiscal year, the Southeast Region received \$29,558,966 in funding. For the 2021-22 fiscal year, this budget was increased to \$31,535,860, with a recommendation to increase it even further to \$34,088,109 next year. As funding is granted per program, the budget reports do not contain any further division which would show how much the BCCY received of these funds in each year.¹⁰ However, as the only juvenile facility in the Southeast Region, we may assume that the BCCY received either a majority of these funds or a greater portion than the various OJJ regional offices.

Public Records Request and Inmate Mortality

As of the writing of this memo, no records pertaining to inmate deaths at BCCY have been received for 2020-2022. However, according to the previous records collected and published on Incarcerationtransparency.org, the Bridge City Center for Youth reported zero deaths for the years 2014 through 2019.¹¹ Additionally, no news articles or other reports were found to have referenced any deaths in this facility, either for the years reported or those yet to be received.

All public records requests for OJJ facilities are submitted through the same portal found on the OJJ website where individuals may upload and submit their formal requests. Users first create a login for the portal, which then allows them to upload requests, send and receive messages pertaining to their requests, and pay any fees associated with obtaining the requested records, all within one central location. Upon submission, requests are then reviewed by Angelic Keller, the Custodian of Records and General Counsel for OJJ. Anyone who submits a public records request will be in direct contact with Ms. Keller through email and the message function found in the portal.¹² While this portal allows for a very streamlined and easy process, my request was repeatedly answered with statements that my requested records did not exist, were not yet prepared, or were not yet due until a certain month. In one exchange, I was first told that some of the records which had been requested would not be ready until late September. I

⁸ <https://ojj.la.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2021-BCCY-Final-PREA-Audit-Report.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.nokidsinprison.org/explore/louisiana/?section=race-interactive>

¹⁰ https://www.doa.la.gov/media/wbfbwh5j/08c_youth_services.pdf

¹¹ https://www.incarcerationtransparency.org/?page_id=37

¹² [https://ojjla.govqa.us/WEBAPP/rs/\(S\(ziouihu3ugwuergi1za5z1ey\)\)/supporthome.aspx](https://ojjla.govqa.us/WEBAPP/rs/(S(ziouihu3ugwuergi1za5z1ey))/supporthome.aspx)

patiently waited to follow up with this request until after I was told that one of the datasets would be ready, only to then be told that those records were now not due until December. I often received conflicting and vague responses to my requests, despite eventually requesting “anything and everything” that I could be sent for any of my facilities. While very prompt and quick to answer my messages, I did not feel that my requests were being fully considered and looked into, but were instead stalled and brushed off until a later date.

Facility Leadership

The Bridge City Center for Youth is a facility under the supervision of the Office of Juvenile Justice, which oversees all of the state’s youth services, including several other juvenile detention centers and secure care facilities.¹³ Donna Bowie is listed on the OJJ facility directory as the Interim Deputy Director of the BCCY, serving in this capacity since May 2020.¹⁴

Oversight

The BCCY received American Correctional Association accreditation in June 1994 and has remained in good standing since. Additionally, the OJJ engaged in candidacy status in 2007 in the Performance Base Standards through the Council for Juvenile Corrections Administration. The Performance Base Standards are the nationally recognized best practice for the administration of juvenile corrections.¹⁵ To maintain this status and accreditation, facilities must uphold a certain level of quality of care and custody of individuals. These standards are reviewed through routine audits of the facility.

A 2021 audit of the BCCY, conducted by an U.S. Department of Justice certified PREA auditor, examined 43 different standards of facility quality, services, staff, procedures, and programs. As stated in the audit report, each standard must be answered and rated. There are no standards which may be marked as “not applicable”. The compliance of each standard must be graded as “exceeded”, “met”, or “not met”. All of the 43 standards which were reviewed for this audit were determined to be met, with none either exceeded or not met. These standards include zero tolerance of sexual abuse and sexual harassment, supervision and monitoring, employee training, resident reporting, and many other factors relating to the quality of the facility.¹⁶

Additionally, the BCCY underwent a Performance Audit by the Louisiana Legislative Auditor in 2020, relating to the use of room confinement/isolation. Some of the key findings of this report were that, for the years 2019 and 2020, there were 206 instances of confinement, with the average duration of that confinement being 6 hours among all instances. The two listed offenses which result in the longest duration of confinement are attempted escapes and “other”.¹⁷

Of the 3 attempted escapes during this time, confinement duration average 10.3 hours. The “other” category consists of 16 offense instances, leading to an average of 14.8 hours of confinement. The highest percentage of instances resulting in confinement were due to threats or violence to staff. There were 67 instances of this offense during this period, and each offense resulted in an average of 9.5 hours of confinement. Lastly, inmates aged 16-18 make up the

¹³ https://www.doa.la.gov/media/wbfbwh5j/08c_youth_services.pdf

¹⁴ <https://ojj.la.gov/about-ojj/administrative-functions/ojj-secure-care-facilities/>

¹⁵ https://www.doa.la.gov/media/bw5id0if/08c_youth_services.pdf

¹⁶ <https://ojj.la.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/2021-BCCY-Final-PREA-Audit-Report.pdf>

¹⁷ [https://app.la.state.la.us/publicreports.nsf/0/68508947202a54458625882a0064c0bb/\\$file/000268d7a.pdf?openelement&.7773098](https://app.la.state.la.us/publicreports.nsf/0/68508947202a54458625882a0064c0bb/$file/000268d7a.pdf?openelement&.7773098) (p. D.3-D.4)

highest percentages of those who were confined during this period at around 68% of the total instances.¹⁸

Facility News Coverage

As mentioned previously, the Bridge City Center for Youth has been a source of much controversy and concern. Since its inception as a juvenile facility, the BCCY has had consistent problems with violence among inmates and staff, countless escapes, and facility-wide riots. A simple Google search of “Bridge City Center for Youth” will provide a seemingly endless amount of news articles spanning several years, reporting on escapes, riots, outcry to shut the facility down for public safety, the revolving door of directors and staff at the facility, and recent governmental action to remedy the BCCY’s many problems. In 2022, alone, numerous incidents at the BCCY have been reported, including:

1. The July escape of an inmate who later shot and carjacked a local man in Uptown New Orleans.¹⁹
2. The March 17th escape of 5 inmates, who escaped through the facility’s attic and stole a truck, leading officers on a chase which ended in a crash in Opelousas before they were recaptured.
3. The June 16th incident where 5 inmates escaped and were returned, when only hours later 20 other inmates broke out of their living quarters, took over a part of the facility, and began a riot which sent one facility employee to the hospital.
4. The April escape of a 19-year-old inmate who convinced three other inmates to help him attack a female guard in the bathroom, steal her keys, and jump the fence of the facility to escape, where he remained on the run for over a month before his recapture.²⁰
5. Various articles and other sources which reference the frequent escapes, which amounted to 27 different incidents as of July 19th.²¹

Another key source of news coverage has been the Governor’s plan to temporarily house half of the BCCY’s inmates at a “renovated” portion of Angola, separate from adult inmates. Governor Edwards proposed this plan in an effort to “ensure safety of the youth, staff, and the surrounding community [of Bridge City].”²² The plan was strongly litigated by advocacy groups who attempted to block the transfer of these juveniles to Angola, which has a litany of problems all its own without the addition of a juvenile population to care for. This case was brought before Chief U.S. District Judge Shelly Dick, who ruled to allow the transfer of the juveniles to Angola, stating that there were no better alternatives in light of the threat posed to other youth housed in the facility and OJJ custody, and to the public after numerous escapes.²³

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ <https://www.wdsu.com/article/new-orelans-bridge-city-escape-safety-loyola-nashville-car-jacking-shooting/40645123>

²⁰ <https://www.fox8live.com/2022/06/16/5-juvenile-inmates-escape-bridge-city-center-3-back-custody/>

²¹ <https://www.wdsu.com/article/new-orelans-bridge-city-escape-safety-loyola-nashville-car-jacking-shooting/40645123>

²² *Id.*

²³ <https://www.fox8live.com/2022/09/24/federal-judge-refuses-block-planned-transfer-violent-youth-offenders-angola/>

As stated, the news reports and articles surrounding the many problems of the BCCY are infinite, but the general consensus among officials and citizens is that a few specific things may be to blame for the BCCY's problems, which are its dormitory-style structure which allows near-unrestricted movement for inmates, often leading to increased violence, as well as the lack of staff and security measures which might otherwise prevent such frequent escapes.²⁴

Transparency

Every year, the OJJ releases a series of reports to the public, outlining custodial populations, demographical trends among juveniles in custody, and contracts entered into for providing services to youth or their families.

Every 6 months, OJJ produces a de-identified dataset on all youth served in the previous six months. These reports are published in January and July. Additionally, for each fiscal year, OJJ produces a data report showing trends based on the previous fiscal year's data, including demographic information on youth served and details such as reason for custody placement, average length of stay, supervision details, caseload of PPOs, recidivism, and financial information on expenditures for secure and non-secure. Lastly, every October, the OJJ will produce an annual report describing each contract entered into for the purposes of providing services to youth or their families, including inputs, outputs, outcomes and results achieved under the contract during the preceding fiscal year. All of the reports listed above, as well as several others, may be found easily within the OJJ website's "data and reports" tab.²⁵

Conclusion

The Bridge City Center for Youth remains open and operating as of today, but there appears to be an ever-increasing amount of push for its closure, both from the public and from officials. As evidenced by the issues discussed here, the BCCY's problems lie in its very make-up and unfitness for functioning as a carceral facility. At this time, there does not appear to be any clear answers on how to solve the BCCY's issues, but there is no question that some drastic change is necessary both for the youth housed there and the community of Bridge City.

²⁴ <https://www.fox8live.com/2022/06/16/5-juvenile-inmates-escape-bridge-city-center-3-back-custody/>

²⁵ <https://ojj.la.gov/data-resources/data-reports/>

Bridge City Center for Youth

3225 River Road, Bridge City, LA 70094

HISTORY + DESIGN

- First opened as Our Lady of the River convent in 1961
- Purchased by La. D.O.C. in 1971 to function as juvenile detention center.
- Now functions as a maximum-security secure care facility under the supervision of the OJJ.
- Within walking distance from the homes of Bridge City residents.
- 30-acre campus with several buildings and facilities including dormitory bays, a chapel, classrooms, medical facilities, recreation rooms, a gymnasium, and an outdoor pavilion.
- Inmates are housed in dormitory-style made up of 5 open-bay dorms and 3 isolation/segregation rooms.
 - Very little restriction/security over the movement and actions of inmates; thought to be a primary cause for facility's regular violence and escapes

POPULATION

- Male juveniles 12-20 years old
 - Majority adjudicated for violent offenses
- In Q4 of 2021, Jefferson Parish held 21 juveniles in secure custody.
 - 95% male
 - 81% African-American



OVERSIGHT+NEWS

- ACA accredited in 1994; remains in good standing
- 2021 PREA Audit; all 43 standards met
- 2020 Performance Audit by La. Legislative Auditor, investigating use of room confinement/isolation; only few recommendations to cut down on use of isolation.
- Audits seem to be at odds with actual incidents.
- Countless news reports on escapes, riots, attacks on both other inmates and staff, crimes committed by escaped inmates, the revolving door of directors and staff at BCCY, the many calls to shut the facility down by the community, the transfer of the "most violent offenders" to Angola...the list goes on.
- How can a facility that has dozens of escapes and violent incidents per year have met all 43 different standards of quality just a year ago?

Inmate Mortality

- No data received for years 2020-2022
- According to past years' data, there have been no deaths reported at the Bridge City Center for Youth since 2014.
- No mention of deaths in various news articles or other audits, either.