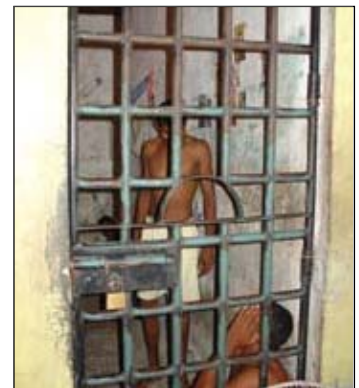


The Roatan Jail: **BYOF**

by Barbara Wakeen, MA, RD, LD

(Bring Your Own Food)



A look inside the Roatan Jail. Clockwise from top right: female cell; male cell; kitchen (for preparing corrections staff meals); dining hall.

During a trip to Roatan, Bay Islands, Honduras this past February, I sought the opportunity to visit the local correctional facility (which happens to be the jail on this island)—one of my side-quests when vacationing outside of the U.S. To my fortune, Ed—the manager at our resort—had a good relationship with the local government authorities, which made my venture a reality.

This article offers a brief glimpse of my visit to the jail in Roatan. Chief Benitez, the Jail Commander, and Captain Barahona, the Chief of Tourism Police, graciously answered my questions and granted me a tour of the facility, the housing area, the officers' dining hall, and the kitchen.

This jail is the only correctional facility for a population of 100,000 residents of the three Bay Islands – Roatan, Utila, and Guanaja. A 100-person law enforcement staff patrols this islandic area and population. Seventy percent of the popula-

tion resides on Roatan, the biggest of the three islands, with an estimated population increase of 3 percent per year. Roatan is about three miles wide and 30 miles long.

During my tour, I learned *the jail does not provide food to those who are incarcerated*, and thus has no kitchen or dining hall for inmate meals. An inmate's family is responsible for providing food—and the means to consume it—for their family members. Families bring food during designated times: 7-8 a.m., 11 a.m.-12 p.m., and 5-6 p.m. It is searched for contraband by a corrections officer and then distributed accordingly. Needless to say, there are no food standards or requirements here.

Contraband is much like it is in the U.S.—metal silverware is not permitted; plastic is allowed. Belts and shoestrings are not permitted.

If an inmate has no family, other inmates may opt to share their food. Missionaries come weekly and contribute to the provision

of food for inmates with no family members available. If an inmate has money, he or she can request food to be purchased and an officer will bring in food. Inmates eat in their cell.

Inmates are incarcerated for “faults” or “crimes.” A *fault* is a minor offense—such as getting in a fight or drunk driving—and requires only a short stay, usually just overnight. A *crime* is something more offensive requiring a longer stay before going to court for sentencing. In general, the length of stay averages 24 hours for 3 months. Inmates are transferred twice a month to the prison in La Ceiba, which is on the mainland.

At the time of my visit, there were only three cells—male, female, and minor (juvenile), with a population of 14:

- Twelve males were all in one cell, much like a holding cell, except this is the only one and they are held there for the duration of their sentence. Most of those we could see were sitting on the cement floor. One of our guides, Ed, brought a pack of cigarettes to “barter” in exchange for letting us take a picture. He offered anyone who wanted a cigarette and light so they could smoke (in their cell of course). This cell had a working light bulb that was a typical household bulb exposed and screwed into a socket. With a limited view, I could see graffiti on the cell walls.
- One minor was in a cell. This teenage male was sitting on the cement floor close to the cell door. There was no light in his cell (I believe the bulb was burned out). A minor is anyone younger than 18 years of age. Regardless of the crime (even murder), a minor’s infraction is still considered a “fault.”
- There were no females at this time. In the female cell, there was a male corrections officer who was housed separately from the rest of the males in what we might consider “protective custody.” He was incarcerated as a result of a shooting incident under investigation due to a family filing charges against him.

The jail was in the process of add-on construction with six new cells, divided by population, as identified above, then by offense—fault or crime.

A nurse comes from the hospital daily for those who require medication. If further medical attention is required, inmates are transported to the hospital. The nurse is on call as needed.

Correctional staffing (includes all jail employees and law officers) at the jail is a bit different than we are accustomed to in U.S. corrections. The staff works from and lives on site for three weeks at a time and then are off one week. A typical shift is about 12 hours, although they are on call 24/7. Those who live on the mainland do not see their families during this time.

There is a kitchen where two female foodservice workers prepare meals for the corrections officers and employees three times a day. On exceptional occasion, an inmate might receive food from the kitchen as well. During my visit, the two foodservice workers were making some sort of deep-fried turnover for dinner. We didn’t see a menu and I didn’t ask to see one. Other typical foods are beans, rice, fruits, and common foods of the culture. Corrections officers pay for their meals—1000 lempira/month for food. This is equivalent to about \$53 U.S.

Corrections in Honduras gives new meaning to inmate rights and corrections responsibilities.

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Dietitian’s Corner

Queries of the Quarter

- Diet manuals used by state and county facilities
- Farm and garden food usage
- Standards to approve jail menus
- Juvenile regulations for boot camps
- Menu planning standards
- Student intern requesting prison tour

Meetings and Announcements

Dietitians in Corrections Networking Luncheon

August 5 - 9, 2007

ACFSA International Conference

Ontario, CA

www.acfsa.org

American Dietetic Association (ADA) Food & Nutrition Conference & Expo (FNCE)

September 29 - October 2, 2007

Corrections Sub-Unit will hold a networking meeting.

Time and dates to be announced.

Philadelphia, PA

www.eatright.org

National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC) National Conference on Correctional Health Care

October 13-17, 2007

Nashville, TN

www.ncchc.org

Past Dietitian’s Corner articles are available on the ACFSA web site—www.acfsa.org.

Membership Information

If you would like to be added to the Dietitians in Corrections networking EML (electronic mailing list), please email me directly at bwakeen@neo.rr.com. You *do not* have to be a dietitian. This is an informal discussion group and your name/email address will be listed in each email sent to the group.

To join the CD-HCF Corrections Sub-Unit, contact me at bwakeen@neo.rr.com. ADA and CD-HCF membership are required to participate. If you are already a member and want to subscribe to the Corrections Sub-Unit EML or be listed in the directory, visit the CD-HCF website at www.cdhef.org/subunits.