

Officials in prison towns adjust to bad neighbors, tout benefits

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The 1,896-bed Saguaro Correctional Center in Eloy, Ariz., houses prisoners from Hawaii. It was completed by CCA in 2007 and is a prototype design expected to be similar to the federal detention center planned for Pahrump.



The Saguaro facility in Eloy, Ariz., was built in recent years and now stands finished.



CCA's flags fly proudly over one of its facilities.

Vicki Kilvinger, mayor of Florence, Ariz., admits when people hear the name of her town, they often think of prisons.

Florence, Ariz., not only has nine prisons, but there's also Florence, Colo., home of the Supermax prison.

But Kilvinger and a number of officials who live in prison communities see a lot of advantages to housing a community of offenders inside fences.

They debunked concerns raised by some Pahrump residents leery that a planned federal detention center being built by Corrections Corporation of America will reduce property values, bring unsavory relatives and friends to town to visit the inmates, lead to escapes and not result in the good-paying jobs that have been promised.

Many of those officials, however, talked about ambitious expansion projects by CCA once they built a facility in town.

"They're wonderful partners to us. There are some people who feel we should be ashamed to be a prison town, but we're not. They've been great. The state prison and the private prisons have been very good neighbors to us," Kilvinger said.

A long-time town board member, Kilvinger recalled when CCA first approached the town board 13 years ago.

"They pay very good salaries. I have three or four friends that went to work there that love it and have been able to climb the ladder and move up," Kilvinger said.

There has never been a riot at the detention centers, she said. CCA operates the Florence Correctional Center and the Central Arizona Detention Center.

Florence Public Information Officer Jess Knudson said the town has received additional revenues from the state of Arizona since the 17,000 prisoners in town increased its population. CCA has 3,500 prisoners in Florence, providing almost 1,000 jobs, he said.

The Pahrump facility will house almost 1,100 inmates awaiting trial in federal court or deportation.

Just a little way west from Florence, near the junction of Interstates 10 and 8, Eloy, Ariz., plays host to four prisons: the Eloy Detention Center, hosting mostly prisoners sought for immigration violations; the Red Rock Correctional Center, which has a contract to house Alaskan prisoners; Saguaro Correctional Center for Hawaiian prisoners; and now the La Palma Correctional Center, housing prisoners from California.

"All facilities are different and the pay scales can be different, just depending on the type of contract they have. So it just depends on the type of facility they're building out there. If it's a federal contract with ICE or customs enforcement or whatever, then typically those type of facilities do pay a little bit more," Eloy Mayor Byron Jackson said.

The Eloy Detention Center, operated by CCA, used to have a contract with the U.S. Marshal Service, but in 2006 the federal government pulled the contract, Jackson said. Now it's under contract with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, (ICE) which means the hiring requirements for correctional officers aren't quite as strict, he said.

"There definitely has been a great benefit to having CCA in our community. They spent the money to build these new facilities. Most of the ones here, they derive construction sales tax, which gives us the ability to do some one-time projects we otherwise couldn't do," Jackson said.

The mayor said the correctional facilities are six miles away from town, "so they're out of sight, out of mind, but they are in our incorporated bounds."

That being so, Jackson said, "They get visitors on a regular basis. There's people that fly out here to visit or move out here because they're here. It's crazy what people would do for their incarcerated family members."

La Palma Correctional Center alone employs 1,000 people, he said. It is supposed to hold 3,200 prisoners.

Jack Barrett, mayor of Holdenville, Okla., said the 960-bed Davis Correctional Facility was initially built with a \$34 million bond issue in 1996, but was sold to CCA two years later for a \$1.5 million profit.

Barrett said the center provides 325 jobs and a \$5 million a year payroll in a community of 4,700 people.

He said CCA recently spent \$58 million to add 700 more beds to the Davis Correctional Facility, creating 70 more jobs.

"Most people think the jobs are only guards, but it's a community within a community. They have their own clinic. They need nurses, they need a school, they have a vo-tech school so there are teachers and other professional jobs out there besides guards. So whatever it takes to operate a city, they will be there," Barrett said.

While the oil industry has created a cycle of boom and bust in Oklahoma, the mayor sees the detention center as offering recession-

proof jobs. He said, however, the Davis Correctional Facility is a state institution, with a lower pay level than the federal center being considered for Pahrump.

"They meet or exceed whatever the state pays for that level of employee," Barrett said.

The mayor also emphasized the utilities provided to the prison as an added benefit.

Barrett said it hasn't reduced property values.

"They've been here since '96. Back then the property around the facility was selling for \$500 an acre. You can't touch anything for \$2,000 per acre today," he said.

While the Eloy mayor saw lots of relatives coming to visit inmates, Barrett said only about 75 visitors came to visit relatives at the Davis Correctional Facility over the Christmas holidays last year.

"You're not going to have a bunch of new motels built, that's for sure. Usually you'd be lucky if your mother comes to visit you if you're incarcerated," Barrett said.

CCA has donated money to the town Christmas parade and the fireworks show, the mayor said. There haven't been any escapes since 1996.

The bottom line, Barrett said, is, "How many \$80 million projects do you have coming to your community? They just don't come by every day."

Marcella Sandoval, the city manager of Milan, N.M., just off Interstate 40 in northwestern New Mexico, said a detention center operated by CCA in her community houses almost exclusively illegal immigrants. Sandoval said CCA trains the illegal aliens while they're housed there. Then when they're released, they're usually transported to Mexico.

Asked about the pay, Sandoval said it was about \$12 per hour for an incoming correctional officer.

Sandoval said her town has benefited from prison labor. Prisoners at the facility built park signs and benches. They opened a green house and gave out plants for landscaping the city, she said.

Kilvinger said Florence even has a prison tower on the logo for their town, which is also known for its junior rodeos.

"It doesn't seem to have affected us. We love our small-town feeling. We never have to deal with terrible traffic," Kilvinger said.

The mayor recalled only one escape about 20 years ago, when a prisoner recruited some young people to help him get out. He eventually died in the desert.

"They say if you were were escaping from prison, would you stay in Florence?" Kilvinger asked.