



Future of the Oahu Community Correctional Center

What is the difference between a Prison and a Jail?

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Many people use the terms “jail” and “prison” interchangeably; however, in purpose and operation, the two types of facilities are substantially different. On a basic level, a jail is a facility where individuals (jail inmates) are held pending adjudication. These may be persons who either could not meet their bail or may not have qualified for bail according to the courts. In certain cases, a jail may also house individuals who have been to court, convicted, and sentenced to short-term incarceration – usually less than a year. On the other hand, a prison is exclusively populated by individuals (prison inmates) who have been convicted of a serious crime and are serving a long-term sentence – typically a year or more.

The differences between a jail and a prison may not be obvious to the casual observer. While jails and prisons must both meet inmates’ basic needs, both are required to provide access to many of the same programs and services. Because the length of time jail inmates are incarcerated is often measured in days and not years, the focus of jail programs and services is on stabilization versus a prison’s focus on long-term rehabilitation. In addition, a jail operates on a ‘decentralized’ services model whereby programs and services are delivered to jail inmates in their housing areas.



Van Cise-Simonet Detention Center in Denver, Colorado (i.e., jail). Single building for short term offenders.



Federal Correctional Institution in Welch, West Virginia (i.e., prison). Large, low-rise, sprawling institution for long term offenders.

A challenge for the operation of a jail is the unknown. For example, many jail inmates who first arrive at the facility may be in crisis due to an undiagnosed or untreated substance use disorder and/or mental health illness. In these circumstances, the burden is on the jail to provide a proper diagnosis and appropriate treatment. In addition, the jail population is under the legal jurisdiction of the Judiciary (courts) and not the Department of Public Safety. Jail inmates can only be released, placed in outside programs, or assigned to other alternatives to incarceration with the approval of the courts.



Federal Detention Center in Honolulu (i.e., jail).

In contrast, a prison facility houses inmates that have been convicted and sentenced. Upon their arrival at the facility, prison inmates are assessed and evaluated and then assigned to appropriate housing based upon identified risk and need. By this time, prison inmates with a substance use disorder and/or mental illness who are coming from a jail have been diagnosed and begun treatment. Because of the longer-term sentences in a prison, the operation of the facility will have a focus on rehabilitation. Programs offered may include training in a trade and education programs for helping prison inmates to acquire their GED or secondary degrees. There may also be programs that utilize prison inmates' skills and labor. Accordingly, many prisons will operate on a 'centralized' services model where prison inmates will be allowed to move throughout the facility to areas such as dining, health clinic, recreation, prison industries or classrooms.

The matrix provided below summarizes many of the key features of jails and prisons and revealing the substantial design and operating differences between the two types of facilities.

Feature	Jail	Prison
Inmate populations	Individuals (jail inmates) held pending adjudication. Includes those not able to meet their bail or have not qualified for bail. May also house individuals who have been to court, convicted, and sentenced to short-term incarceration – usually less than a year. In Hawaii known as a Community Correctional Center.	Populated by individuals (prison inmates) who have been convicted of a serious crime and are serving a long-term sentence – typically a year or more. Also known as a correctional facility.
Length of Stay	Stays are typically measured in days or weeks. Individuals sentenced to a term of a year or less can serve in jail.	Stays are measured in years.
Programs and Services	Focus is on stabilization including diagnosis and appropriate treatment for medical and/or mental health illness.	Focus is on long-term rehabilitation. Programs offered may include training in a trade and education programs for acquiring GED or secondary degrees.
Operating Model	'Decentralized' services model whereby programs, services, meals and treatments are delivered to jail inmates in their housing areas.	'Centralized' services model where prison inmates are allowed to move throughout the facility to areas such as dining, health clinic, recreation, prison industries or classrooms under escort.
Legal Jurisdiction	Courts have jurisdiction; inmates can only be released, placed in outside programs, or assigned to other alternatives to incarceration with approval of the courts	Department of Public Safety has jurisdiction.
Design Features	Depending on location, number of beds, etc., facilities are typically are compact in design (one structure) rising 3-5 stories (mid-rise) or 6-10+ stories (high-rise).	Depending on location, number of beds, etc., facilities are typically 1-2 stories (low-rise). Multiple structures in a campus-like arrangement with housing, administrative buildings, classrooms, dining, medical and other units.
Security Features	Highly-secure structures with security features incorporated within building design and operation. Typically, avoids perimeter fencing, vehicle patrol road, high-security lighting, similar measures.	Typically highly-secure structures incorporating rows of perimeter fencing, vehicle patrol roads, CCTV cameras, high-security lighting, guard towers, and other measures.

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Toni E. Schwartz, Public Information Officer

Hawaii Department of Public Safety

Tel: 808.587.1358

Email: Toni.E.Schwartz@hawaii.gov