



Outside visiting area and playground at Belmont Correctional Institution renovated to appeal more to younger visitors.



The hallways leading into visiting were also painted to establish a warmer welcome for visiting family and friends.

A warmer welcome

How visitation keeps families connected

BY INDIA DUKE

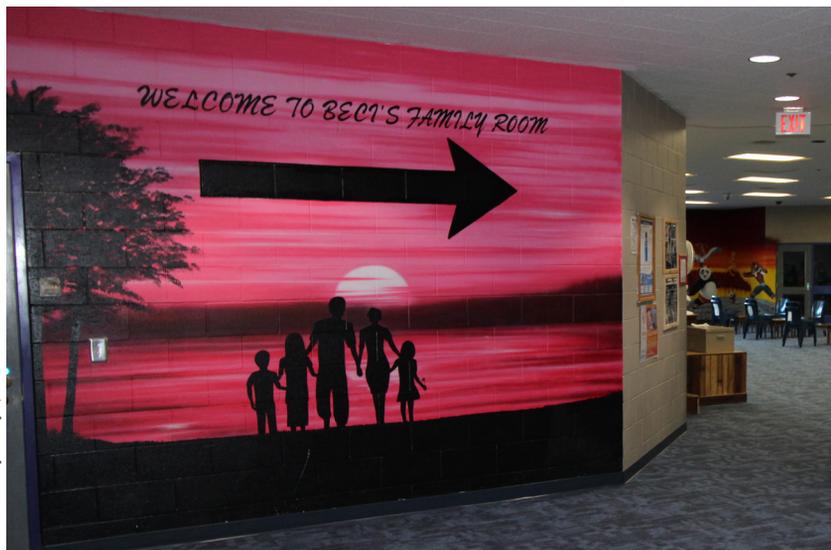


Photo courtesy Eric Lyle, Wardens Assistant

Belmont Correctional Institution's entry hallway to their family room.

Wednesday through Sunday Lieutenant Alisa Tobin spends a portion of her shift monitoring visitation at Noble Correctional Institution (NCI) in Ohio. She'd see family and friends visit incarcerated loved ones and each day would be similar. The guests were processed through security and escorted to visiting where they'd wait in slightly padded metal chairs framing a small wooden table in a pale colored room.

After a moment of waiting in what could be described as a cold environment, a faint warmth filled the room as incarcerated adults are met with smiles and brief hugs. Despite having paintings hung on the walls and access to vending machines,

Mural photo at top courtesy India Duke; Abstract yellow background: istock/enjoynz; Playground photo courtesy Eric Lyle, Wardens Assistant; Family photo: istock/Prostock-Studio

for those that have never been to a prison it could prove intimidating.

“It was a blah kind of setting. It was just, almost robotic in feel because they come in, they sit at a table that you had to hunch over because it was at knee level,” Tobin said. “No one wants to visit hunched over the entire time.”

Visitation plays a pivotal role in the rehabilitation process keeping family ties strong during incarceration.

She wasn't the only person who noticed the room, and overall atmosphere, was overdue for a change.

In 2019, Annette Chambers-Smith was appointed as the Director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction by Governor Mike DeWine. One of her initial priorities was to create opportunities for stronger connections with the incarcerated population and their loved ones. Correctional professionals across the country understand the importance that visiting has in the overall operations of a prison. In a research study published in 2021, visiting in Florida state prisons was found to have a positive impact on a person's likelihood of reoffending — lowering two-year recidivism odds by 3.8%.¹ In the same study, formerly incarcerated adults in Minnesota prisons who received visits decreased their odds of reoffending by 13% for felony convictions and 25% for parole or probation violations.² The positive impact of maintaining important family connections can be found in Ohio's correctional system as well. Ohio has recently incorporated visitation into its security classification process and uses visitation as a violence predictor. The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction has found that institutional violence is significantly less likely as both male and female incarcerated persons receive more monthly visits.

Leveraging on the known positive impact of visitation, Director Chambers-Smith asked each institution to

renovate their visitation areas to be more hospitable to achieve positive relationships with loved ones — a goal directly aligned with Governor Mike DeWine's key pillars of faith, family, and friends.

“Overall, we're just trying to make the experience one that allows them to maintain the good relationships with their families,” she said. “We know from research that most of our people spend their first nights out of prison with their family, so anything we can do to make sure that relationship is healthy and as intact as possible helps our people successfully reenter society.”

Director Chambers-Smith also noted security is important.

“Officers' stations were moved to facilitate visibility. Prisons will have the option to use a body scanner after a visit to detect contraband conveyance. You can create a secure environment that is also warm and inviting,” she said.

She encouraged prison leadership to utilize outdoor space and make the rooms as welcoming as reasonably possible since the work of connecting and sometimes even reconnecting families is done in these spaces.

The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction is responsible for the care and supervision of over 43,000 incarcerated individuals. In addition, the department is also responsible for the ways they connect to their families, with one of the main sources being visitation.

Family involvement during a loved one's prison sentence has proven to make a significant difference in the lives of incarcerated adults. They serve as a support system from the first to the last days of any sentence, and after they're released.

Visitation plays a pivotal role in the rehabilitation process keeping family ties strong during incarceration. When incarcerated adults are released into society, they return to their families, and it is important both parties feel comfortable.

Family members are less likely to visit if they don't feel comfortable which could inadvertently create a negative headspace for the incarcerated adult.

“Most people *do* get to go home and that relationship, it needs to be nurtured, and it has to heal. I've talked to a lot of children who are now adults, and they'll tell you ‘I have never forgiven my mother or father for not being part of my life while they were incarcerated,’” said Administrative Assistant Tim Buchanan.

Renovating visitation

The staff at Noble Correctional Institution worked together to determine theme, furniture, flooring and pricing for their visiting area upgrades.

Lieutenant Michael Burkhardt chose the theme of an Italian coffee shop and formed a committee, including visitation staff, to pull together ideas for furniture and flooring.

“We took that and ran with it. If it’s a café we’re going to make it a café,” Burkhardt said. “The whole idea was to make it look like a street café as much as possible.”

Tobin researched cost efficient café style décor and was able to secure pub style cushioned chairs and tables with three adjustable heights from Ohio Penal Industries.

Burkhardt selected incarcerated individuals to paint floor to ceiling murals covering the entry way, and two of the visiting room walls.

“You’re already walking into a prison and you’re already having to deal with officers at front entry, so when we get them through those two locked doors, let’s send them into somewhere different,” Burkhardt said.

The mural depicts an Italian outdoor café that sits just off a river with people sitting at tables enjoying different drinks or sitting alone. One of the people sits alone with a guitar by his side while he writes a song. Taking a closer look, his paper says, “I wish you were here,” appropriate

for the visiting room. Others included in the mural are young boys playing, a man preparing to propose to his girlfriend, a woman feeding birds at the river and a man painting a picture of the scenery.

The backdrops for family photos were updated to include movie characters like the *Despicable Me* minions. Other upgrades to come include a playground area and a small basketball hoop in the outdoor visiting area and plug and plays in the game room for pre-teen visitors.

Tobin said she thought of her own children while choosing gaming and outdoor playground equipment and wanted to make sure there was something for all age groups.

“We could bring a cornhole board out there but there was nothing for the younger kids to have that Daddy and me interaction. There was just nothing for the little ones to do. You can only color so many pictures or read so many books and play so many hands of UNO,” she said.

In addition to changing the look and feel of the visiting area, the reservation system to schedule family visits also changed. Families are now able to cancel and schedule visits online or through the answering service while the visiting staff is away or outside of regular operating hours.

“It used to be only one line to call for 2,500 offenders which makes the lines tie up fast and of course then you get calls from the families that can’t get through. Now, families don’t have to worry about if they’re going to get through,” Tobin said. →



Photo courtesy India Duke

Noble Correctional Institution visiting area after majority of indoor renovations were completed including the mural, improved flooring, and seating options.



Photo courtesy India Duke

A full view of one of the murals emulating an Italian streetscape and café completed by incarcerated adults.

The renovation effort is part of the agency’s way of connecting families and providing a sense of normalcy in a place that could feel foreign or harsh. Families that feel more comfortable during visitation are more likely to continue visiting.

“By changing the environment, it will reduce the barriers put in between families so that they have a chance to mend, heal and grow as a family so there’s better outcomes when the incarcerated person returns to the home,” said Buchanan who was the warden when talks of the renovation began.

Creating strong bonds

Various facilities developed other ways to keep families connected through activities that are often done at home.

About three years ago Warden David Gray of Belmont Correctional Institution began offering the option to order cakes for special occasions like birthdays and graduations. The cakes were ordered through food service provided by Aramark and brought out to families during a visit

“When dad comes to the visit room, and their little boy or girl has a birthday you can celebrate their birthday traditionally,” Gray said. “It’s all about making an uncomfortable situation as comfortable as possible and bringing normalcy to the relationship and build those bonds.”

Just like outside of prison, the cakes were inscribed with names or congratulations in colorful frosting.

The program proved to be a big success but unfortunately, pandemic protocol temporarily shuttered visitation from March 2020 to July 2020. When visitation reopened the cakes were put on hold since sharing food was strongly discouraged. Gray was determined to find a way

to replace the temporarily suspended activity with something just as meaningful with the same goal in mind.

Incarcerated men at Belmont will soon be able to purchase toys or dolls as gifts from the commissary, have them wrapped, and delivered by staff while visiting their children.

“It won’t be very expensive because these guys don’t have a lot of money, but it’ll be something that they can afford and mimic something they could’ve done if he was at home,” he said.

In addition to the activities for families, Gray changed the name of the visiting area to the family room. Much like the upgrades made to Noble, Belmont also renovated their family room to remove the “sterilized” look and feel by painting the walls with murals, updating the reading area for younger children, adding plug and play video games and reopening the outdoor visiting area with seating and a small play area.

“The whole idea is what can we do to keep them connected and make visiting a pleasant experience or as pleasant as it can be in a prison,” Gray said. “Every person that comes to our visiting room is going to have a memory. Why can’t that memory be positive?”

The changes to the visiting area are to make families want to continue to return for visits but the underlying goal is to continue to keep family connections and bonds.

“Ultimately these guys are going home and are going to be a dad again fulltime in the near future and if we can continue to build those relationships while they’re incarcerated, that trauma from incarceration can be reduced,” he said.

This thought process proved true for those at NCI as well. During the holiday season the Christmas tree in

visitation hadn't been set up. Instead of having a worker setup and decorate the tree like every year, an incarcerated man with his wife and two young children spent their visit dressing the tree in Christmas ornaments.

"That's something they could've done at home but unfortunately, he's here. So, I think they made the best of that visit, and they took their time," Tobin said.

Prior to the pandemic the facility hosted family cook-outs where incarcerated adults and their loved ones could barbecue and enjoy a meal together.

"The director's reason for that was that if families could cook together, eat together and clean up together it's a mechanism to help families in other aspects of their lives and grow closer together as a whole," Buchanan said.

Making a difference

Since the completion of the renovations at Belmont and the ongoing projects at Noble, incarcerated men have said they and their families are pleased with the outcome.

Incarcerated individual Michael Mathew, one of several men asked to work on the mural, enjoyed working on the mural despite the long hours to get it finished. What made it worth it for him was his family's reaction, especially his young daughter.

"She's been coming here for a long time, and she likes looking at the painting and it's a better mood setter than the white walls and cramming everyone on top of each other," he said.

Before the renovations the incarcerated population also noticed the room could use a change.

"It wasn't really anything cheerful about it. Everything about it was stereotypical of what you would think of as a prison. After they renovated it, I was like wow. It was different, more inviting and comfortable, the placement of the chairs and they type of chairs that they had," said incarcerated adult Gregory Bennett.

Bennett has been at NCI for the last seven years and gets visits from family frequently. After the renovations he noticed a change in his family's demeanor during visits.

"It definitely allows your family to be more relaxed and not so uptight," he said. "Before they were always just sitting there like gnomes, but now it's more laughs and good vibes you can see that they're more relaxed."

The same is true for incarcerated adult Christopher Myers who came to NCI five years ago and has since been hired as an Aramark fellow.

"I don't feel like I'm sitting in prison having a visit. I feel like I'm out somewhere having lunch with my family," he said.

At county jail, Myers mentioned he couldn't hold his newborn son during visitation as they were separated by plexiglass which makes him appreciate visiting that much more.

"It was very depressing, and I had a hard time with it at first. So actually getting to visit and hold your family and be there it's just an uplifting feeling. Just getting to interact with them just makes a huge difference and makes me know that I have something to look forward to," he said.

Renovations for visiting areas will continue throughout the state with an eye toward fostering strong bonds between incarcerated individuals and their families. The overall goal was to create a space where families could comfortably connect with their loved ones which the staff can confidently say was achieved.



Photo courtesy India Duke

A closer look at the mural at Noble Correctional Institution where the incarcerated artist painted "I wish you were here."

ENDNOTES

¹⁻² Wang, Leah. "Research Roundup: The Positive Impacts of Family Contact for Incarcerated People and Their Families." *Prison Policy Initiative*, 21 Dec. 2021, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2021/12/21/family_contact/. Accessed 9 June 2022.



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