

Drugs a leading cause of women's incarceration

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Drugs, alcohol and violence are the three primary reasons women end up in jail in El Dorado County. And meth is the drug of choice.

It takes a minimum of six years to kick the habit. And the deterioration of what one looks like is rapid and dramatic. But sometimes by the time they get out of jail they are returning to their original selves.

El Dorado County sheriff's Capt. Randy Peshon spoke last week to Soroptimist International South Lake Tahoe about women behind bars and what is going on with the two county jails. The Placerville facility has 311 beds, while the one in South Lake Tahoe has 158. Both are co-ed, though seldom do the two populations mix.



El Dorado County sheriff's
Capt. Randy Peshon talks
Jan. 22 about women in jail.
Photo/LTN

There are between 60 and 75 women in the jails at any given time. Most are between the ages of 24 and 56.

"The No. 1 tool for managing a jail is the TV," Peshon said. "If a fight breaks out, the TV is turned off."

He said it's a lot like raising children. Take away what they want and the behavior is likely to change.

"There's not a lot of difference between the females and males in jail except for relationships," Peshon said. "They care for each other unless you've committed a crime against a child. That's where the men and women are the same."

Riot gear is needed to deal with problems with the men. Sitting down and talking is how issues with the women are handled.

Women like the dormitory style housing because it is more sociable. The men don't like this because it means living with other men.

Peshon has been in the jail division for decades. Before being promoted to captain a few years ago he ran the South Lake Tahoe facility. Now he is in charge of the entire jail system for the county.

He's a big believer in programs for inmates instead of just having them sit around. The goal is to keep them productive. Peshon said about 80 percent of the people have problems that can be worked on, while there isn't anything that can be done for the other 20 percent.

Mental health services are needed by 18 percent of the population. This is 4 percent higher than the national average.

"Jails have become the mental health providers of the county," Peshon said.

It's possible to obtain a full general educational development certificate, work skills, resume writing and other basic skills. Inmates may obtain a laundry manager certificate,

which doesn't cost the county a dime. This is the second year adult education classes have been offered.

One of the most successful programs started in 2007 is a partnership with Lake Tahoe Community College. The culinary arts program teaches them skills in the kitchen. They make meals for their peers and there is also a catering component.

Ninety percent of the inmates in the culinary program find a job – not necessarily in a restaurant – when they are released.

While most facilities would never put men and women together, Peshon likes to challenge the status quo. The culinary program and GED are co-ed. The thinking is that if one of the problems to begin with was the inability to get along with the opposite sex, isolation during incarceration is not going to help when they get out.

All the teaching also helps keep people from making a return stay at the jail. And it's working. El Dorado County is renting out bed space to other counties.