



MADERA COUNTY GRAND JURY

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**Valley State Prison
Final Report 2425-06
Released 06/04/25
Prepared by the
2024-2025 Madera County Civil Grand Jury**

SUMMARY

The Madera County Grand Jury (MCGJ) conducted two inspections of Valley State Prison (VSP) during the 2024–2025 term, in accordance with state mandate to inquire into public institutions, ie, prisons and jails. The inspections included interviews with staff, inmates and a review of data and records from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and California Correctional Health Care Services.

Valley State Prison, originally designed to house 1,961 inmates, now operates well above its design capacity with a population of 3,332 inmates. The prison did not add to the initial structure, they added more beds in each cell. Although the institution has not exceeded its maximum capacity of 3,801, the strain on manpower remains evident. Staffing shortages and reliance on mandatory overtime continue to challenge operational effectiveness. Recurring concerns related to services, accommodations, and administrative actions result in a high amount of grievances. With these challenges, VSP maintains medical and mental health services and provides a wide range of educational and vocational programs, and facilitates access to rehabilitation and reentry support. Programs such as the Cognitive Behavioral Interventions (CBI), Enhanced Outpatient Program (EOP), and partnerships with higher education institutions demonstrate a commitment to inmate reform and reintegration.

ABBREVIATIONS:

BSCC - Board of State and Community Corrections

CBI - Cognitive Behavioral Interventions

CDCR - California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

EOP - Enhanced Outpatient Program

MCGJ - Madera County Grand Jury

VSP - Valley State Prison

BACKGROUND

All California civil grand juries are authorized to inspect the condition and management of the public prisons. The MCGJ conducted an inspection of the Valley State Prison (VSP) facility on September 12, 2024 and again on March 25, 2025. During both inspections, the MCGJ had the opportunity to speak with VSP staff and inmates. Additional requested information such as current population and staffing numbers, details about grievances, and an overview of services and programs was also requested and received.

Valley State Prison, a men's facility located at 21633 Avenue 24 in Chowchilla, CA, was constructed in 1995. Originally housing multi-level female inmates, the prison served as the state's only Secure Housing Unit for female inmates. After the passage of AB109 in 2011, which resulted in a decrease in the female inmate population, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) converted the prison to an all male institution in 2013. VSP currently operates as a Level II facility which the CDCR defines as a facility with open dormitories and a secure perimeter that may include armed coverage. Inmates with a placement score of 19-35, determined by a review of case factors including: age, crime committed, prior incarcerations, gang involvement, etc. can be assigned to this facility.

METHODOLOGY

- Conducted two in-person inspection of the facility
- Interviewed VSP staff and inmates
- Reviewed past [MCGJ reports](#).
- Reviewed the [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation website](#) (VSP facility landing page and statistical reports: SB 601 Dashboard data)
- Reviewed [California Correctional Health Care Services website](#) (in-custody death reporting)

DISCUSSION

Inmate Population

During the 2024-2025 MCGJ investigation, the inmate population was 3,332. The facility has not exceeded the new state approved capacity by adding more beds. Maximum capacity of 3,801 in the last year; however, it remains well over the design

capacity of 1,961. The CDCR manages the state's prison population through its Division of Adult Institutions (DAI) <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/adult-operations>, which oversees secure housing, rehabilitation, and support. DAI is organized regionally to improve efficiency. The CDCR also operates [California Correctional Health Care Services \(CCHCS\) https://cchcs.ca.gov](https://cchcs.ca.gov) for medical, dental, and mental health services.

Staffing

At the time of the inspection in the fall of 2024 there were 1,235 staff members employed, and 82 vacant positions. During the MCGJ inspection 33 employees were certified as bilingual in Spanish. Custodial, nursing, and culinary staff all have mandatory overtime. According to data published on the CDCR website, in the fiscal year 2023-2024, an average of 17,159 hours of overtime were used by custody, dental and mental health, and non-custody staff. Such conditions can cause staff to become fatigued and overburdened, which may result in grievances.

Inmate Grievances

There were 6,149 inmate grievances filed from October 1, 2023 to September 30, 2024. The three most frequent areas of grievances were “Offender Services” with 2,068 grievances, “Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Reasonable Accommodations” with 1,604 grievances, and “Administrative Actions” with 516 grievances filed.

In-Custody Deaths and Attempted Suicides

Between July 2023 and July 2024, there were five inmate deaths, all of natural causes and eight attempted suicides. All deaths while in law enforcement custody, no matter the suspected cause, are mandated to be investigated and made public after the passage of Senate Bill 519. When an in-custody death occurs, VSP must immediately notify the Office of the Inspector General and local law enforcement. A review of medical and mental health evaluations of the inmates are made, as well as a detailed examination of custody practices, resulting in findings and recommendations made to VSP. Information regarding the date of death, age, gender, race, institution facility location, county where death was pronounced, custodial status, manner of death (natural-expected/unexpected) and means of death are all made public on the California Correctional Health Care Services website.

INMATE SERVICES

Medical:

Nursing and primary care provider staff are available to inmates to manage routine and urgent care needs. Clinical nursing staff are onsite 24/7 and primary care providers are onsite during normal business hours and on-call for the remainder of the week. Routine medical care requests are typically accommodated within 72 hours, and urgent requests are seen within 24 hours. There is an onsite Treatment and Triage Area (TTA) for emergency medical treatment. VSP also has onsite pharmacy, laboratory, and radiological services to support most inmate needs including MRI, CAT scans and ultrasounds. The dental care program provides regular check-ups, cleanings, and necessary dental procedures. Registered Dietitians are available via telemedicine consultations for inmates with special dietary needs. All medical records at the facility are overseen by a Health Information Management (HIM) structure that ensures inmate privacy.

Sensitive Needs Inmate Facilities:

Sensitive Needs Inmate Facilities (SNIF) designations are used to segregate inmates with specific safety concerns, often those at risk of harm from other inmates, gang dropouts, informants, or former law enforcement officers. There is a designated Outpatient Housing Unit that is available to accommodate inmates who require 24/7 supervised health care and supportive services. This includes low-intensity nursing care for patients who require assistance with daily living or short-term observations.

Mental Health:

Counseling, therapy, and psychiatric care are offered through two distinct mental health programs at VSP. These programs provide individual therapy services that span 30 to 90 days, in addition to group therapy and psychiatric consultations available to all inmates. The EOP, designed for inmates who require more intensive support, includes weekly individual therapy sessions and a minimum of ten hours of group treatment. Mental health personnel are present onsite throughout the day to ensure continuous support and care.

Rehabilitation:

The Cognitive Behavioral Interventions (CBI) program is an evidence-based treatment designed to identify inmates at risk for substance use disorders. Participants are categorized into one of three tailored program types based on their individual needs. CBI-Intensive Outpatient program aims to help inmates recognize and modify

destructive thought patterns that negatively impact their behavior. Additionally, the curriculum incorporates four sessions focused on anger management. The program is delivered by Amity Foundations, a contracted organization of the Division of Rehabilitative Programs.

Education:

Approximately 1,400 inmates utilize the educational programs, and 227 received GED, AA, BA degrees in 2023.

Pre-literacy, High School Diploma, General Education Diploma (GED), Career and Technical Education (CTE), Bachelor’s degree and Master’s degree programs are all available to inmates.

There are 22 full time teachers employed at VSP, including academic teachers, testing coordinators, college coordinators, EOP teacher, and a Recreation Coach employed by VSP. Valley State Adult School, Merced College, Fresno State University, and Feather River College provide additional educational courses. Inmates are provided with state-issued laptops to support their learning.

Vocational Programs:

Various vocational training programs are available, offering certification opportunities in fields such as masonry, cosmetology, computer and related technologies, small engines, welding, and electrical work. Additionally, work programs provide assignments in areas like laundry, kitchen, and clerical roles. Through a partnership with the Male Community Reentry Program (MCRP), eligible inmates can participate in work programs before their release to support a smoother transition. The facility also hosted a Re-Entry Fair in September 2024 to connect participants with resources and opportunities.

Religious Services:

Services for multiple religions are provided at the onsite chapel throughout the week. Clergy are available to inmates upon request. Religious diets and accommodations for holiday observances are also provided.

Visitation:

Title 15 of the California Code of Regulations (CCR) requires prison institutions to provide a minimum of 12 hours of visitation per week, and VSP provides 19.5 hours. There are two visiting rooms that include tables and chairs, vending machines, and play rooms for young children. Private accommodations are available for conferences with

attorneys or clergy members. Two or three staff members are present to supervise visitations. Cameras have recently been added to the visitation area to help improve supervision. Visitors must pass through metal detectors before entering, and inmates go through a full body scanner to check for contraband prior to returning to the housing units.

Conjugal Visits:

Conjugal visits, also referred to as extended family visits, are permitted for eligible inmates once every 90 days. These visits are intended to support the preservation of family bonds and promote the overall well-being of both the incarcerated individual and their family members during incarceration.

To qualify for a conjugal visit, inmates must meet all institutional requirements, which may include good behavior, participation in rehabilitation programs, and a minimum security classification. The application and approval process is managed by the facility's administration and involves background checks and documentation of the relationship.

Visitors must undergo a comprehensive security screening upon entry to the facility. This higher level of scrutiny ensures the safety and integrity of the visit. Similarly, inmates are subject to thorough security checks upon returning to the general population following the visit.

CDCR Statistics:

As required by Penal Code 5055.5, and a section added as part of Senate Bill 601, the CDCR publishes data on all prison institutions including VSP. The MCGJ reviewed the data and found that 1,050 grams of marijuana were seized in 55 seizure events and 745.86 grams of methamphetamine were seized in 21 methamphetamine seizure events at the VSP in fiscal year 2023-2024. Counts include drugs seized in possession of an inmate, employee, visitor, or found elsewhere on the institution grounds. There were also 118 Use of Force incidents reported in the same fiscal year.

FINDINGS

F1. The MCGJ finds that Valley State Prison (VSP) remains significantly over its original design capacity, housing 3,332 inmates compared to the original design capacity of 1,961, despite not exceeding its current operational capacity of 3,801. This persistent overcrowding may contribute to operational strain and impact the quality of services.

F2. The MCGJ finds that VSP is experiencing a high number of staffing vacancies and that mandatory overtime is widely used across multiple departments, including custody, nursing, and culinary staff. This reliance on overtime may lead to staff fatigue and reduced efficiency.

F3. The MCGJ finds that VSP provides significant medical and mental health services, including 24/7 nursing, primary care, mental health therapy, and outpatient care, as well as access to dental and specialty services, reflecting a commitment to inmate well-being.

F4. The MCGJ finds that the prison's Enhanced Outpatient Program (EOP) and other therapy options offer substantial mental health support for inmates, which is critical given the incidents of attempted suicides.

F5. The MCGJ finds that rehabilitation and educational programs at VSP are available. The partnership with multiple colleges and the availability of digital learning tools enhance access to learning.

F6. The MCGJ finds vocational programs offered to inmates, such as welding, cosmetology, and electrical work, help aid in reentry preparation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. The MCGJ recommends that VSP continue working with the CDCR Population Management Unit to adjust inmate placement and reduce inmate population by advocating for accelerated transfers or conversions of other facilities to Level II.

R2. The MCGJ recommends that CDCR strengthen its recruitment and retention strategies at VSP to address ongoing staffing shortages, especially in the custody and medical departments. Consideration should also be given to offering incentives—such as signing bonuses, retention pay, or additional compensation for bilingual staff—to help alleviate the need for mandatory overtime.

R3. The MCGJ recommends that VSP continue to maintain and invest in its medical services.

R4. The MCGJ recommends that mental health programs such as the EOP be continued, with adequate staffing and resources to meet the need for mental health services and support.

R5. The MCGJ recommends that VSP expand educational offerings and ensure continued access to state-issued laptops and college programming, with an emphasis on increasing outreach to inmates not currently enrolled in academic programs.

R6. The MCGJ recommends that vocational training programs be regularly reviewed and updated to match current labor market demands, and that participation in pre-release work programs through Male Community Reentry Program be expanded where possible.

INVITED RESPONSE

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933 and 933.05, the Madera County Grand Jury requests responses as follows:

From the following governing body within 60 days:

Valley State Prison
21633 Avenue 24
Chowchilla, CA 93610

Warden Valley State Prison
21633 Avenue 24
Chowchilla, CA 93637

Governor Gavin Newsom
1021 O Street Suite 9000
Sacramento, CA 95841

Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC)
2590 Venture Oaks Way, Suite 200
Sacramento, CA 95833

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury. The California State Legislature has stated that it intends the provisions of Penal Code Section 929 prohibiting disclosure of witness identities to encourage full candor in testimony in Grand Jury investigations by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those who participate in any Civil Grand Jury investigation.

* Note: This report was prepared using current information available on the websites listed.
