

New jail designed with an eye on mental health

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ALLISON JONES The Canadian Press, With files from George Halim TORONTO

A new detention centre will soon become the largest correctional facility in Ontario and will boast several eco-friendly measures and unique features such as space for aboriginal smudging ceremonies.

The Toronto South Detention Centre has space for up to 1,650 inmates – about 500 more than the capacity of the facilities it's replacing, the Toronto West Detention Centre and the Toronto Jail, known as the Don Jail.

The new, state-of-the-art facility, which will hold people awaiting trial and those sentenced to provincial terms of less than two years, is expected to open in the next few weeks.

The vast institution has 43 different types of units, including a special handling unit for the most high-risk offenders, a mental-health assessment unit and medical beds.

Each of the inmate living units has – in addition to bunks, toilets, showers, a television and telephones for collect calls – video visit booths, to chat with their visitors using a system similar to Skype.

The units each have a yard, which is a small room, usually with a basketball net, inside the facility with the ceiling open to fresh air.

Robert Boraks, the architect who designed the master plan, said the jail was designed "to introduce as much natural lighting as possible." Natural light is important to the mental health of the inmates, said Dr. Sandy Simpson of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, which is working with the detention Centre to conduct regular mental health assessments.

"Being shut away without light morning and night can be desensitizing." In a 2003 study conducted by Dr. Richard Wener, a professor of Environmental Psychology at New York Polytechnic University, good lighting is a critical part of environmental design.

"If inmates aren't seeing enough proper light during the day, and enough darkness at night, they're going to be affected not only physically, but psychologically as well," said Dr. Wener. Psychological issues translate into negative impacts on health, mood, cognitive performance and the likelihood of accident and injury, the study states.

There is a gym, which is a full-sized basketball court, that is used by inmates on direct supervision units who have been granted good behaviour privileges.

The detention centre will have more than 50 program rooms, said its director, Rose Buhagiar, including classrooms, a multifaith worship room that includes a foot bath for Muslim offenders to cleanse before their prayers and an aboriginal program room.

A sweat lodge is also expected to be built soon on the grounds of the detention centre.

The detention centre is offering half-hour public tours on Friday, Saturday and Sunday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., but photography won't be allowed.