

Washington City Paper

District Line

From the January 7, 2005 issue.

Seasonal Funk

What makes for a happy holiday in the neighborhood clink? Try Right Guard.

By Sarah Godfrey and John Metcalfe

For Christmas, prisoners in the D.C. Jail got the usual little gift packages filled with goodies such as candy, a pen and pencil, holiday cards, and deodorant from the D.C. Department of Corrections' Religious and Volunteer Services division.

The presents didn't suck as much as you'd think.

Toiletries don't appear on the holiday wish lists of most, but for prisoners who hadn't seen deodorant sticks for much of the fall season, the packages were veritable horns of plenty. The jail canteen, which is supposed to outfit the facility's 2,000-plus residents with life's necessities, was plagued with product shortages for several months, often in the department of hygiene products.

Bill Meeks, spokesperson for the Department of Corrections, blames the shortage on a transition between contractors. When the department terminated its relationship with the Swanson company in March of last year, it was forced to put stopgap measures in place to keep the canteen afloat as it searched for a replacement.

Still, despite the monthslong problem, jail officials insist that dysfunction in the canteen is not the norm.

"I don't think anything is wrong with the system—it works well," says Meeks, speaking on behalf of the department's director, Odie Washington. "Three hundred and sixty-five days a year we feed, clothe, and provide commissary to...inmates. We're no different from any other food distributor in that we're periodically out of items. A glitch occurred, and this was just a minor disruption."

Meeks claims that the glitch was corrected in late November and the 150-plus items the canteen offers are now available to any inmate with the funds to purchase them. Inmates, however, haven't forgiven and forgotten their recent days of filth.

"Canteen? How much time you got?" asks Cliff, a tall, bespectacled man who is standing outside the jail's visitor entrance. Cliff, 46, got out two weeks ago—he's just back to pick up some personal effects. "Nine times out of 10, what you want, they don't have," he says.

The canteen isn't the most customer-friendly business to start with. Well-wishers on the outside have to

send prisoners funds via money orders, which can take weeks to filter into their personal accounts. When the cash comes through, prisoners use it to order from the canteen. After they put in requests for items such as beverages, cookies, fish, underwear, and personal-care products, the amount they owe is deducted from their accounts. Their orders are then processed and shipped to the jail, and the goods arrive to their units in due time. It's a cumbersome state of affairs, and, with the recent shortages, reminiscent of life behind the Iron Curtain.

"I'd order stuff like two bars of Irish Spring, two bags of sour balls, and I couldn't even get that," complains Cliff. "I never got everything I ordered—no toothpaste....Then the heat is messed up, and they had a waiting list for thermal underwear."

There was no apparent logic behind the lack of one item rather than another. "Mrs. Laurence," as she identifies herself in front of the jail, says her husband requested a bushel of stuff from the canteen. The husband, who has been incarcerated on a parole violation since early November, received only things that were edible. "When he got his little receipt, they had only took \$9.45 of his \$35," Laurence says. "He got his food products, but he didn't get the deodorant, the lotion, the stuff he ordered."

And nobody else did, either, if you believe the words Laurence attributes to her husband: "He said, 'Baby, this [cell] block is funky. It stinks so bad, I gotta have to take me a shower.'"

Lafayette Bailey, a paralegal for the advocacy group D.C. Prisoners' Legal Services Project, says he heard more than a dozen complaints about out-of-stock items.

In early November, two prisoners clashed after one scrubbed down with another's used chunk of soap. Bailey says he confirmed the incident with several inmates and heard rumors of "a lot of blood." "He was putting it back and got caught doing it, and that's when all hell broke loose," he says.

To make matters worse, prisoners had to deal with their depressing conditions in relative isolation. The canteen, at times, was out of stamps, making communication with the free world difficult. In the staggered missives they managed to send home, inmates sometimes asked for products that were meant to be on sale at the canteen.

"My brother's been in since October," says Jeanette Smith, a 30-year-old resident of Northeast. "He told me, 'Don't worry about money—I have money—but I can't order from the canteen.'"

Aside from filling out grievance paperwork, there wasn't much prisoners could do to fight halitosis and vengeful pit stench.

"In today's climate, as unbelievable as it sounds, it's not clear that courts...would find even a lack of toothpaste to violate the Eighth Amendment," says Deb Golden, a staff attorney for D.C. Prisoners' Legal Services Project. Golden says her group is looking into legal options for prisoners denied toiletries, though she wonders why the burden should fall on outside organizations.

"I think, if I was a guard, I'd want people brushing their teeth," Golden says. "You'd think there would

be some institutional pressure there.”CP

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