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Worried Warden . . . New Folsom Head Faces Change In Problems

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Paul Morris looks tired. There are deep lines in his face and gray in his hair.

It's 10 a.m. at Folsom Prison, and the new warden is lighting one low-tar cigarette after another.

Prison work — those who do it will often tell you — is not a business which promotes personal peace, or longevity.

And certainly not at this 1,000-acre, granite-walled institution which is the state's toughest prison, and one of its oldest.

Morris, 47, has been on the job as Folsom's warden for a little over a month. A 25-year-veteran of California prison work, he has held virtually every position in the state system — from a San Quentin guard to Soledad's associate superintendent to the top job at the California Correctional Center in Susanville.

"I had the good fortune," he says modestly, "not to miss a single level. I hit all of 'em."

Right now he's worried about the very immediate prospect of "double-celling" at the state's maximum security prison, which currently houses about 1,800 men.

Putting two maximum security prisoners in 5 by 12-foot cells is not, officials say, good corrections policy. Some of the worst prison violence in California history has occurred during periods of severe overcrowding.

"We're getting very close to double-celling," says Morris grimly. "We expect it momentarily."

"Double-celling means overcrowding. It's obvious that tensions build up whenever there is overcrowding. Nobody likes double-celling."

Assistant state corrections director Phil Guthrie says "rather substantial double-celling" is expected throughout the state prison system by spring.

At Folsom, that poses special dilemmas for Morris, since the prison houses some of the more

sophisticated, older prisoners and persistent repeat offenders. Housing the men at Folsom is a tricky business, officials say, requiring that they know the current proclivities of rival gangs and the internal squabbling among them.

Morris comes from a place — the light security, dormitory-style California Correctional Center in Susanville — which is a considerably different kind of prison. Until recently it was called a "conservation center," where men were trained to go into very minimum-security forestry camps, and it is generally regarded as one of California's "nicer" prisons.

"It's as different as night and day," says Morris. "The physical plant as well as the type of people."

For one thing, he says, the plumbing at the century-old prison is falling apart. The Department of Corrections has to spend a lot of money every year to keep the toilets running at Folsom.

"This place is hard to maintain,"

Morris says with some understatement. "Its age causes continual and ongoing maintenance problems. We're trying to replace all the toilets and the plumbing."

"At any given time, we have 20 or 30 cells we can't use because of old plumbing."

In 1971, state prison consultant Robert Keldgord recommended in an exhaustive study of the system that Folsom and its aged companion, San Quentin, be closed. At various times before and since, officials have pondered the idea.

"I can't imagine Folsom being closed," Morris says, "because to replace it would cost millions of dollars. I find it highly unlikely that money would be forthcoming from the legislature."

Philosophically, Morris says he is "custody-oriented," which means in prison talk that he leans more toward how secure institutions are kept than how happy prisoners are in them.

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Bee Photo by Dick Schmidt

Warden Paul Morris lights up, talks of the problems.

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"But," he adds, "I try to strike a balance."

To benefit prisoners and their families, Morris says his "top priority" is to improve the now-limited prison visiting facilities. He plans to provide a permanent, more secure family visiting unit, so inmates now regarded as security risks can participate in that program. And, he plans to expand the overcrowded daytime visiting hours in the prison visiting room.

Another major priority of the new warden is to improve the number of minority and female employes at Folsom.

While superintendent at Susanville, he doubled the minority staff there — from 6 to 12 per cent — in little more than a year. As a result, he says he was the cause of a lawsuit filed against the Department of Corrections by the California Correctional Officers Association, which is charging the department with so-called "reverse discrimination".

According to department statistics, Susanville, Folsom and the Sierra Conservation Center in Jamestown have the lowest percentages of minority staff members in the state prison system. As of Sept. 30, Folsom had 14.4 per cent, Susanville 12.1 per cent and Jamestown 11.5 per cent. By contrast, the prison with the best minority staff ratio is the California Institution for Women in Frontera, with nearly 40 per cent.

Guthrie says Susanville and Jamestown have their rural locations

in common — with few minorities in the surrounding areas. Folsom, he adds, with its proximity to Sacramento, has no such excuse.

Prison populations are traditionally low-income and heavily, disproportionately black and Chicano. At Folsom as of Sept. 30, whites comprised 45 per cent of the inmate population, blacks 32.5 per cent and Chicanos 17 per cent. Staff members, by contrast, are approximately 85 per cent white — many of them reportedly second, third and even fourth generation prison employes — six per cent black and five per cent Chicano.

"That's one of the big problems he (Morris) will have to deal with," Guthrie says.

"In every aspect of its operation, Folsom is very tradition-oriented. Change comes slowly. There is little turnover. It's our maximum security

institution, and there is a need for caution and order. Folsom has had an unchanged role for many years, and everything contributes to a status quo situation.

Morris says he intends to approach everything at Folsom "slowly and cautiously." But he is firmly committed to affirmative action hiring and promotion for minorities and women. In his own family, one of his four children — a daughter — is a correctional officer at Soledad.

"This is an emotional issue," he says. "I intend to give a lot of attention to affirmative action and will do everything I can legally do to improve it."

"He'll do it, too," says Rudolph Rutherford, his administrative assistant and one of the few black staff members at Folsom. "Paul Morris will do it."