

Inside the Secure Community Transition Facility

It's been a month since King County's Secure Community Transition Facility opened in SODO. The "SCTF" is Seattle's new level-3 violent predatory sex offender residence, at Spokane Street and Second Avenue.

"It's not known when a court will move a qualified civilly committed sex offender into the SCTF," says Steve Williams, spokesperson for Washington State's Department of Social and Health Services. This DSHS facility is equipped for six residents and can be expanded to accommodate six more.

Twenty-five closed-circuit cameras see you in and outside. To enter, you press an intercom button, identify yourself, and then a staff member unlatches the door's magnetically controlled lock from the control room. A concrete sidewalk follows a wall of large, earth-toned bricks that rise 10 feet to fine mesh iron fencing. The path turns down a corridor open to the sky. At the end is the "sally port."

The sally port is a steel and glass box, with doors to the sidewalk, a visiting area, a visitor bathroom, and to the inner facility. No two doors can be open at once. Each can withstand 1800 pounds of force.

Half a block away, a freight train from the Port of

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Seattle rumbles toward Georgetown; inside, it's quiet as a church on a Tuesday afternoon.

"We can't have a lot of community members coming into the facility," King County SCTF Manager Tabatha Yockey explained, "because we have to take into account it is a secure facility."

Dr. Allen Ziegler, DSHS administrator for the Less Restricted Alternative (LRA)/SCTF program, added, "The key thing is to assure the community of their safety, and to ensure treatment of our residents in a secure environment."

Remodeling of the former warehouse, by Western Ventures from Mountlake Terrace, began last January and was completed in July. SODO business Guardian Security Services installed state-of-the-art surveillance and alarm systems. Twelve employees are now onsite, next year there will be 26. Overlapping security measures cover every point.

"Residents will have the opportunity to transition into the community in a safe way, safe for the community and safe for the resident," Ms. Yockey emphasized. "There's always risks with this population, but I feel confident that the risk is low."

Martha Stewart might have preferred doing time here. Creams, tans, light grays complement each other. There's a clean, pleasant smell, like a health clinic. Bright

Craig Thompson

Inside the Secure Community Transition Facility

lacquered wooden doors accent a calming decor.

Concrete floors stretch throughout. The control booth overlooks a large common area. A kitchen opens onto it-- residents will do their own cooking, cleanup. They are not allowed knives. Cabinets and the kitchen island are stained dark red, with olive green countertops. Along the wall, above the counter, blond cabinets add contrast. Stainless steel appliances sparkle.

A large central room features a plush area rug, couches, comfortable chairs, tables. It rises two stories to a vaulted skylight that bathes the space with sun. Along the walls are six bedrooms, three to a side, plus a phone room, two baths, and a storage area.

Bedrooms and bathrooms don't have cameras. Baths have showers, no tubs. Residents may lock the doors of their rooms; staff members have the key. Remote controlled nightlights let staff check residents through door windows.

The bedrooms resemble college dorm rooms, with a desk cubby, chair, a single bed. The residents have the opportunity to choose their own colors and designs for bedspreads. Solar tubes illuminate the ceiling. "If the individual has a night job, he can close it so he can sleep," Ms. Yockey said. There are no other windows.

Only a judge can place someone here, on recommendations

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of counselors, therapists, correction authorities. The typical resident will be a violent sex offender deemed likely to re-offend, who served prison time and finished a rigorous treatment program at the Special Commitment Center on McNeil Island. The average age of the men is mid-40s, some older, not in good shape from years of incarceration.

Each continues treatment while learning how to integrate into society, how to shop, manage money, find a job. He will continue weekly individual and group therapy, reinforcing positive behaviors, countering negative ones. Those with histories of alcohol and drug abuse may attend Alcoholic Anonymous meetings. Residents are required to keep a journal and to share it with treatment providers.

Dr. Ziegler explained, "Part of the skill is learning how to deal with the situation."

"They are," SCTF manager Tabatha Yockey added, "violent sexual predators who have earned their way into this facility through treatment and court process."

Some have family support networks, others do not. "Getting a job will be a challenge," Ms. Yockey observed, "because there will be staff with them maintaining a line of sight at all times." Notification of employers may cause problems for residents, even if the employer accepts them, other employees may not.

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Resident trips must be approved by the SCTF manager and a Community Corrections Officer, whether it's going to a bookstore or on a walk. Each location is investigated to ensure it is an approved site. Outside, residents wear a GPS ankle bracelet as an additional tracking measure.

Entertainment is monitored. Most residents have computers, but do not have Internet access. They can't watch certain videos and programs on the common TV, or go to places that put them at risk.

Dr. Ziegler described the SCTF as, "a well thought out program," but added, "You can't become complacent. You're working with individuals with significant problems."

The state is providing mitigation. For two years, DSHS will spend \$600,000 for information coordination, police training, and victim counseling. Also funded is a 6-month test project providing a police presence, plus lights for the underside of the nearby West Seattle Bridge.

"We've tried to diffuse community fears by having tours for local businesses. We view ourselves as a business in SODO," Dr. Ziegler summarized.

"We view ourselves as neighbors."