

PENNSYLVANIA PRISON SOCIETY

To: Kyle A. Russell, Warden
From: Dzemila Bilanovic, Pennsylvania Prison Society Regional Manager
Noah Barth, Pennsylvania Prison Society Prison Monitoring Director
Regarding: Lehigh County Jail Walkthroughs June and July 2025
Date: August 26, 2025
Copied: Janine Donate, Director of Corrections
Lehigh County Commissioners¹
Claire Shubik-Richards, Pennsylvania Prison Society Executive Director

The Prison Society serves as Pennsylvania's independent prison monitor. We assist people in custody resolving issues related to their health, safety, and dignity. To better assist the county, we have prepared the following memorandum summarizing our walkthroughs of Lehigh County Jail (LCJ) on June 23rd and July 21st, 2025.

During these walkthroughs, we observed every general population and restricted housing unit, and conducted structured interviews with 107 men and women in custody. Our top-level findings from these observations and interviews include:

Residents report:

- Difficulty in accessing the law library
- Delays in accessing healthcare
- Insufficient food

Unlike many facilities across Pennsylvania, residents also report:

- Regular access to laundry
- Consistent distribution of the inmate handbook.

The housing units had well functioning air conditioning and lighting. We observed some discoloration and potentially mold in the showers, but the other areas of the units were in good physical condition.

Background

Prison Society staff and volunteers² conducted two walkthroughs of the LCJ on June 24th and July 21st. We were escorted by members of the treatment team. The walkthroughs centered on visits to each general population and restricted housing unit in the jail. Structured

¹ Sheila Alvarado, Ron W. Beitler, Geoff Brace, Zach Cole-Borghi, Jeffrey Dutt, Dan Hartzell, Jon Irons, Antonio A. Pineda, April Riddick

² Prison Society volunteers Sharon Finnegan and Mary Tomlinson, Prison Monitoring Director Noah Barth, Manager Dzemila Bilanovic, and Associate Cass Tilly.



interviews were conducted with 107 incarcerated men and women. This constitutes approximately 14% of the total jail population. All interviews were voluntary, anonymous, and interviewees were randomly selected. Responses are presented in aggregate as we did not find any significant differences in responses between units, custody levels, or genders. While not conclusive, the experiences shared with our team point to areas of good practice and areas for potential improvement.

We also toured the kitchen and observed the recreation space in several units. Our staff escorts brought us to all sections of the facility that we requested, gave us time and privacy to speak with people in custody, and answered our questions.

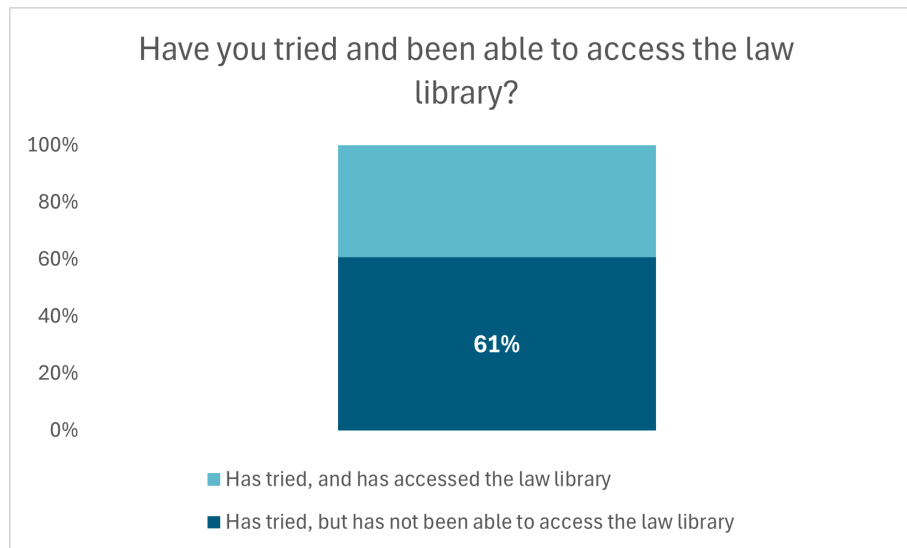
Designation	Unit names	Number interviewed
Men's general population	2A, 2B, 2C, 2D, 3A, 3D	71
Women's general population	4C, 4D	13
Men's RHU	3C	11
Women's RHU	4C	1
Men's medication assisted treatment (MAT)	3B	11
Total		107

Law library

The incarcerated people we spoke to explained that the law library is only available on jail provided tablets for a maximum use of four hours per day. Of the 74 people who reported trying to access the law library, 45 people (61%) said they weren't able to get access. One respondent said he'd "never used a computer before" effectively making it impossible for him to use the law library, especially as there is no support from a librarian. Other people we interviewed also noted the lack of a librarian as a limiting factor, as well as the size of the tablet, lack of access to a printer, and limited usage time.



We were also told that tablets are assigned to newly arrived people once per month. This means that if you are assigned to a housing unit just after distribution, you may have to wait 30 days to get access. In addition, we were told that if people are not physically present on the unit during distribution due to a work assignment, medical appointment, family visit, or otherwise, they may have to wait an additional 30 days to receive a tablet.



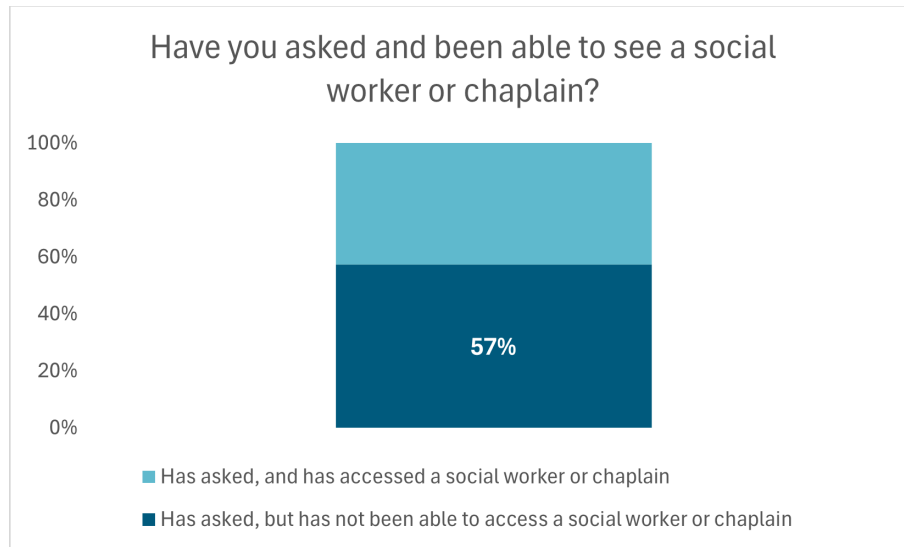
Access to counseling services³

Of the 82 people we interviewed who reported trying to see a case manager, 47 (57%) reported a wait time of over one week, or an inability to see a case manager at all. Reported access to counseling services varied considerably from unit to unit. One person noted “they (case managers) take their sweet time.” On another unit we heard “she’ll get to it right away.”

At least three people we spoke with expressed frustration with wait times but also sympathy for overworked staff. One stated “He’s working on three blocks right now, he’s barely here.”

³ Our interview initially asked about access to “a social worker or chaplain.” Interviewees clarified that treatment team members in the LCJ are called case managers and the jail has no chaplaincy staff. We adapted our question accordingly.

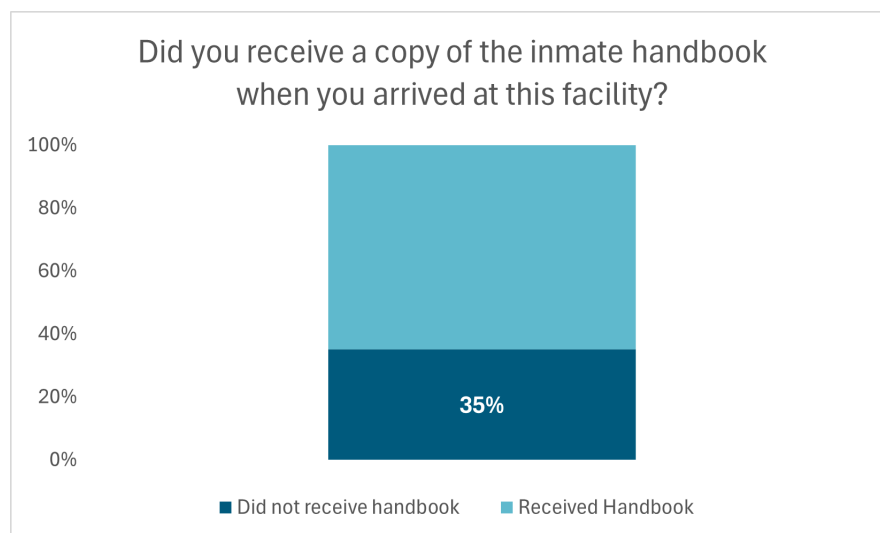




Inmate handbook

The majority of the people we spoke with reported receiving an inmate handbook when they arrived (65%) at the jail. One group we interviewed explained that the handbook is distributed with a package of basic goods (e.g. toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant) on arrival at the jail.

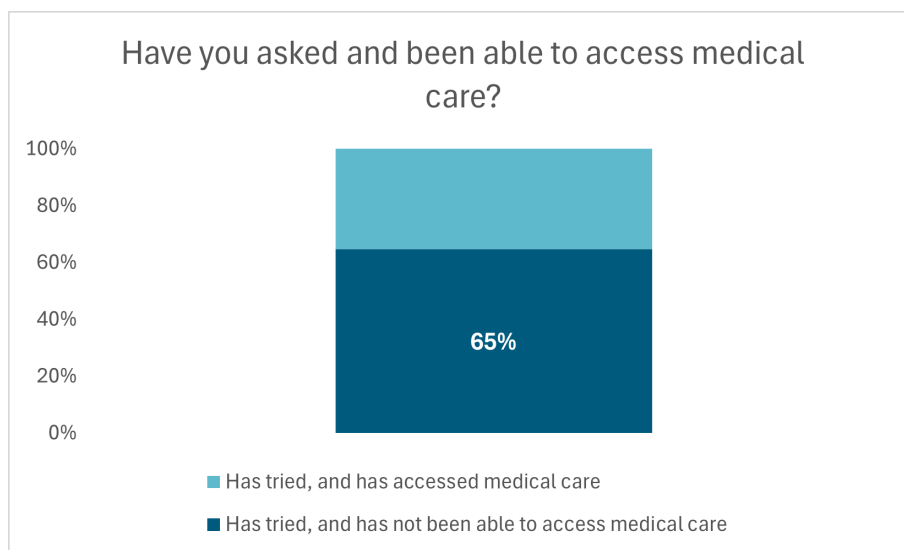
Of note however is one woman who only speaks Spanish but reported being given a handbook in English. We have met a number of people in the LCJ who only speak Spanish; providing them with a copy of the jail's rules in their native language would be helpful.



Medical

Of the 99 people we interviewed who reported asking to see medical staff, 64 (65%) reported wait times of one week or longer. One person noted “(you) need to pass out to get medical help,” another said “they only help people they want to.”

In one unit we looked inside the request slip boxes. The medical slip box was piled high with submissions suggesting that it had not been emptied in a long time.

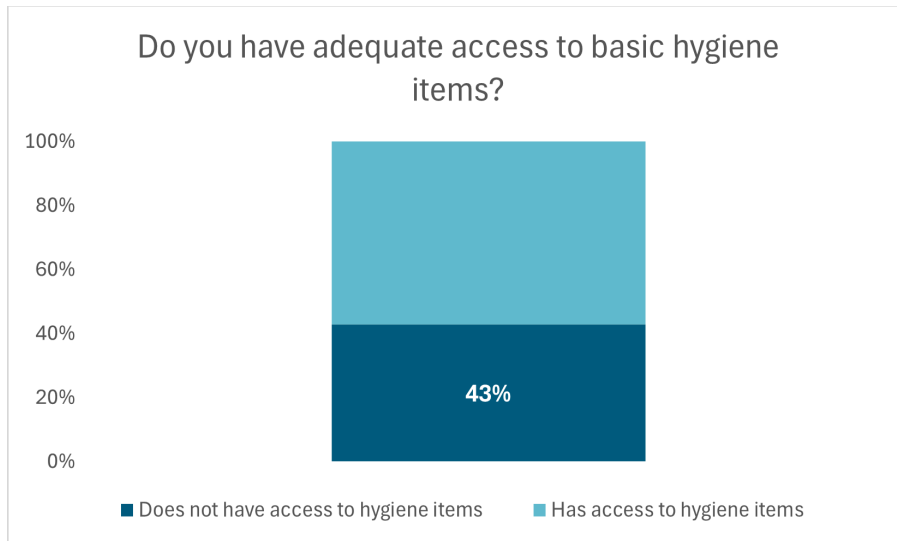


Hygiene

Of the 98 people we asked, 56 (57%) report regular access to basic hygiene products like soap, toilet paper, and feminine hygiene products. We observed toilet paper and soap placed out for open access on all housing units as well as feminine hygiene products in the women’s unit. That said, people we interviewed in multiple units commented that the jail does not provide indigent packages containing basic items (e.g. toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant) after an initial package upon arrival.

Men and women we interviewed reported that they can only get nail clippers or shaving razors through medical and only once a month.

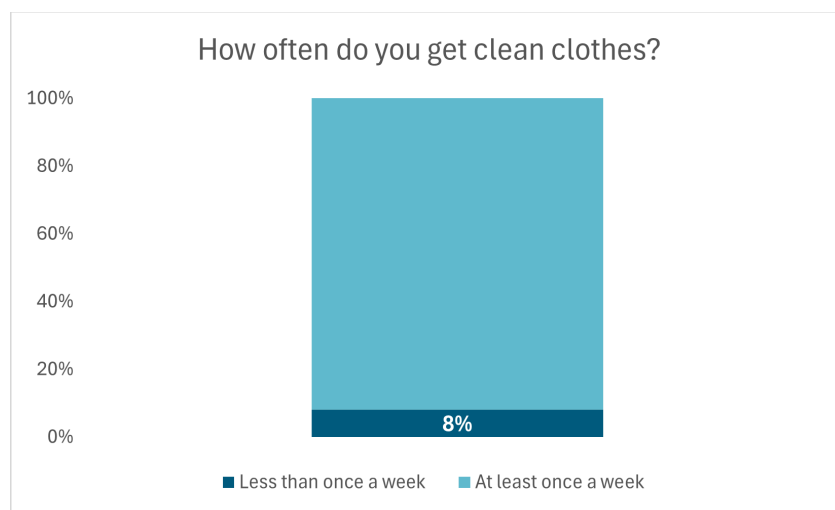




Laundry

Ninety-two percent of the people we spoke to said they regularly get clean clothes, with only eight people out of 99 saying that they had experienced an issue getting clean clothes. The people we spoke to in all units we visited consistently reported that laundry is done three times per week.

We observed however that prison issued undershirts appeared thoroughly worn and yellowed. The people we interviewed reported that socks and underwear are also yellowed and expressed a desire for new clothes. One man told us that he had been wearing the same set of “whites” (i.e. socks, undershirt, and underwear) for 15 months.



Food

We did not ask a specific question about food in our interviews, however, nearly every person we spoke to raised concerns about food. The most common complaints were about insufficient quantity and/or poor quality. Several people we interviewed noted that on weekends meals are only served twice a day- brunch in the morning and dinner in the evening. During our visit to one unit we witnessed commissary being dispensed; several people reported relying on it to supplement their food intake.

Thank you once again for facilitating this walkthrough, it is our intention that this memorandum will be of assistance to the administrators of the Lehigh County Jail. We look forward to our continued work with the residents and staff of the LCJ.



Summer 2025 Lehigh Walkthrough Appendix

TOTAL INTERVIEWED: 107

Question Asked	#	%
When you arrived at this prison, did staff give you a copy of the inmate handbook?		
Yes	61	65%
No	33	35%
Have you been able to access the law library?		
Yes	29	39%
No	45	61%
How long does it take to see a chaplain or counselor?		
Report a week or less	35	43%
Report greater than one week	47	57%
How long does it take to access medical care?		
Report a week or less	35	35%
Report greater than one week	64	65%
Do you have adequate access to basic hygiene items?		
Report having enough hygiene items	56	57%
Report NOT having enough hygiene items	42	43%
How often do you get clean clothes?		
Report at least 1x per week	91	92%
Report LESS than 1x per week	8	8%