



north country public radio

 Search

[News](#) [Listen Live](#) [Programs](#) [Calendar](#) [Weather](#) [Music & Arts](#) [Community](#) [About NCPR](#) [Contact](#) [Support Us](#)

regional news

Special report: A look inside Moriah Shock Prison

by [Natasha Haverty](#)
[Listen with NCPR Player](#)

Witherbee, NY, Sep 28, 2012 — Two years ago, Moriah Shock Prison near Port Henry was next on the list of correctional facilities New York State wanted to close. Camp Gabriels near Saranac Lake and the Summit Shock Prison near Albany had already been shut down, and the prisons in Lyon Mountain and Ogdensburg were also on the chopping block.

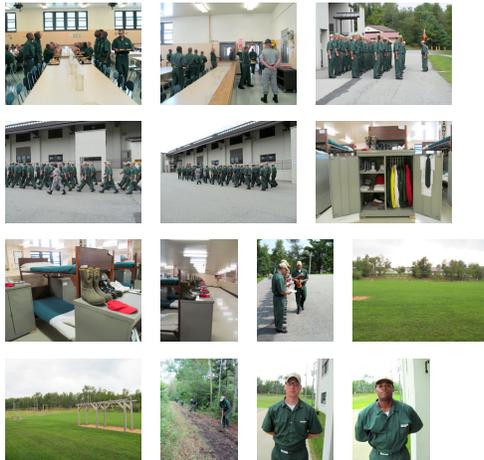


Lunchtime in the mess hall. Photo: Natasha Haverty

But the local community and Essex County officials rallied enough support to keep Moriah open. Today, 188 men live on the spartan campus, set in a former mining facility at the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains.

Corrections officers and some inmates at Moriah Shock say the prison's program offers a fresh start to men willing to work hard. But a quarter-century after the state's "shock" program was created, the question of whether it really works remains unresolved.

Life in Moriah Shock - Photo slideshow by [Natasha Haverty](#)



It's lunchtime in the chow hall at Moriah Shock Prison. The room looks like a high school cafeteria. There are fifty men sitting in their seats, eyes straight ahead or locked on their trays of food. When the prison captain Boyce Rawson walks in, one inmate breaks discipline: he turns his head to look, and gets dressed down.

Life here is so regimented that even a turn of the head is against the rules. Shock incarceration is just what it sounds like: a shock. The prison is set up like a military boot camp.

Most of the guys inside Moriah were drug users like Jeff Daring. He came to the program two months ago, and says this is his first state bid. Jeff says, "I came to the shock program because I got involved with drugs. Before that I had a presidential

NCPR is supported by:



Regional Headlines:

Hear this

[Listen with NCPR Player](#)

[Download audio](#)

Share this

Explore this

Reported by



Natasha Haverty

Producer-in-Residence

Tags

[adirondacks](#) · [courts](#) · [criminal justice](#) · [drugs](#) · [economy](#) · [education](#) · [politics](#) · [prison](#) · [youth](#)

[Story location](#)

scholarship to Alfred University and because of the drug use I fell out."



"Shock is the type of program where there are consequences," Captain Boyce Rawson says, "but there is also positive reinforcement when they do something right." Photo: Natasha Haverty

Nonviolent offenders under the age of 50 with a sentence of less than three years are eligible to swap prison time for the six-month shock program. Jeff is 25, and wears black-rimmed glasses. He says coming here is "kind of a double-edged sword:" "This is an opportunity. I got myself into a situation where normally, if shock program wasn't available I'd be in prison now, one to four years. On the other end of the sword. I'm a felon, in prison. I keep it in the positive. I accept what I've done in the past, but now I'm in shock and I spend every moment trying to figure out how to not ever come back here."

[News near this location](#)

Moriah is one of three shock prisons in New York. In the late Eighties and early Nineties, the number of people in prisons around the country soared to an all-time high. The surge came from tougher laws and mandatory sentencing that put more low-level drug offenders behind bars. States couldn't build prisons and find beds fast enough. So they needed to come up with alternatives.

The time served in Shock is short, just six months, but it's severe. Everything is in military bearing: men don't walk, they march; they stand at attention and don't fidget or slouch; they only speak when they're spoken to and every statement begins and ends with sir or mam. Every morning the men are up by 5:30 and out by 5:45 for two hours of physical training. And every weekday the inmates put in at least six hours of manual labor.

Drill Instructor Juleigh Walker is in charge of the first platoon at Moriah. For Walker, the strictness of the Shock approach produces rewards: "Break 'em down enough so that you work on the discipline piece first, and then you can begin to build again." Inside her platoon's squad bay, the sheets on each bed are stretched and folded so tightly every corner looks pinned down. Every white t-shirt is folded in a six-by-six inch square. "All of that is self-esteem builders," Walker says, "all of that is wow look at that, I just ran five miles, I've never done that before in my life."

It's the untold story that New York's Shock program is really a star, a national star.

Not everyone buys the idea that this kind of discipline and military regimen helps inmates after they're released. The last report by the National Department of Justice showed that about 30 percent of Shock graduates find themselves back in prison after two years. That compares with 36 percent of regular prison inmates. And in some shock prisons around the country, there have been serious problems. According to press accounts, some officers haven't been well trained and have been accused of abusing their power. One inmate's death in Florida led to the closing of all of the shock prisons in that state.

Martin Horn teaches at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. He used to be commissioner of New York's Department of Corrections — the top guy in the entire state prison system. Horn says that there is the risk of abuse whenever a strict military discipline is imposed without a larger philosophical framework that pays attention to the individual. And for Horn, it's this focus on the individual that sets New York's Shock Program apart. Unlike many other programs that have been closed down, New York's focus on treatment. Drug and alcohol rehabilitation, group skills building in sessions they call Network, and GED classes take up almost half the inmates' time. Horn says, "It's the untold story that New York's boot camp program is really a star, a national star."



Drill Instructor Juleigh Walker and the first platoon. Photo: Natasha Haverty

Men at Moriah say there's a lot about life here that they'll be trying to replicate when they get out. Yunik Wynn, like Jeff, is in prison for the first time. Yunik's from Queens, NY. He's 35 years old. Yunik says that when he first got sentenced, he thought he was essentially going into the military. "But then I see the network part of it, and the school part of it, and I see they were trying to set up a structure that's equivalent to being out in the streets, working, going to school college a couple of times a week, and the fitness part, and I think that's very good, a good structure for successful living."

Once Yunik gets permission to stand at ease from the drill instructor next to him, he opens up a little. "I really stress out, I'm a worry wart? And that's the main thing I'm taking from this program, dealing with my stress," Yunik says. "I'm more relaxed here! I'm very relaxed."

For Captain Rawson, the officer who reprimanded an inmate at lunch, He says this is what he's trying to create: an environment where inmates can catch their breath, build some new skills. He says the program works in part because the prison guards believe in it. Rawson makes a strong contrast with other prisons, emphasizing that Moriah Shock is a clean, positive environment, "And it's a safe environment. Not just for staff, but for inmates. You know what I mean? Inmates can go to sleep at night, and sleep!"

Even critics of the Shock approach agree that this kind of commitment among the staff is valuable. Jeffrey Butts directs the Research and Evaluation Center at John Jay College. Butts says

that if the only contribution of this program is to make the staff focus on structure, and having a theory that they follow so that their behavior is consistent and they respond consistently to people and incidents as they come up, then this is preferable to a facility or correctional program with no structure and no plan. "But that does not mean that there is some magic potion that they've discovered," says Butts.

And for Butts, this is an important distinction: Moriah Shock may be a well-run program, he says, but that's not the same as being a successful program. He says it makes perfect sense someone like Yunik would feel better, even calmer, while he's at Moriah, but that may not help him when he lands back at home.

"We don't have the resources to replace community life for every single person who lives in a stressful violent community," Butts says. "What we have to do is change those communities. But you can't solve these problems by taking people out: it's like vacation you say boy this is nice, but it doesn't change the factors that caused you to feel stress in the first place."

Captain Rawson agrees that men like Jeff and Yunik will face their biggest challenges after graduation. Rawson says that men who come to Shock have to make some difficult decisions when they return to the environment in which they got in trouble in the first place.

Jeff and Yunik both have two and a half months before they graduate from Moriah. I mean obviously I'm not going to walk around, I'm not going to march around and call cadence," Jeff says, "But it helps establish certain discipline that's essential through the program, and this is from the heart, I'm not just speaking to build up the program because I know whatever I say is going to be fine."

Yunik says he feels positive he won't fall back into the negative behavior. "But then I almost feel guilty. I was on the right track, I just got sidetracked. So being around these positive people is just reminding me what I'm supposed to do, what I want my future to be. I just can't wait to get out, and do my thing, and do what I'm supposed to do."

When the men at Moriah file out of a building, each one shouts an "oo-rah" as he passes through the door. It's a sort of ritual inmates learn when they arrive here — a way for each man to call out that he's ready for the challenges ahead.



A regimented smoke break, looking over the Adirondacks. Photo: Natasha Haverty

Visitor comments

© 2012 North Country Public Radio, St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York 13617 • phone: 1-877-388-6277 • email radio@ncpr.org
 NCPR is a proud affiliate of:  NPR •  American Public Media •  Public Radio International