

Promising Practices

Using the Scandinavian Prison Model for Successful Reintegration



[Scandinavian prisons](#) emphasize safety, transparency and innovation, focusing on normality and reintegration into the community after release from prison. The Scandinavian model is one that many jurisdictions have looked to as a gold standard for successful reintegration.

In Pennsylvania, the State Correctional Institution (SCI) Chester has launched the Little Scandinavia Unit, which is a living pilot project aimed toward evaluating the impact of Scandinavian prison practices in a U.S. prison on both individuals in prison and correctional officers. [In 2019](#), the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections visited Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and formed a partnership with the Norwegian Correctional Service, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service and the Danish Prison and Probation Service. Researchers from Drexel University and the University at Oslo have been following, documenting and researching the unit from the beginning.

Little Scandinavia launched in May of 2022—the unit can hold 64 men, who live in single cells and have access to a shared kitchen, community-oriented living, outdoor green space and plants.

About the Little Scandinavia Unit at SCI Chester

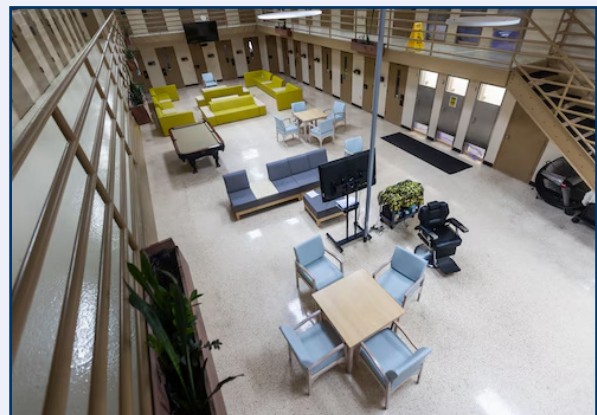
SCI Chester is [particularly well equipped for a study of this kind](#), as the prison is already home to therapeutic communities, which are residential group-based treatment approaches to mental health, substance use disorders and other related needs. Also, individuals incarcerated in the SCI Chester prison have access to additional spaces such as classrooms to take college courses, vocational programs and music and art rooms.

Residents for the Little Scandinavia Unit are chosen through the lottery system, with the population intended to be representative of the general prison population, including those with behavioral health issues. The unit is not a reward for good behavior, and no one is excluded from participation, except those individuals with violence or misconduct in the recent past.

The unit has a higher staff ratio and a heavy community-oriented focus. Residents cook their own meals, and the unit is furnished with colorful furniture made of cloth, not of steel or plastic, with

planter boxes sprinkled throughout.

Currently, the project is focused on continuing to develop policies, procedures and protocols, a process that will run through 2025. The first six men who joined the unit are serving life sentences and act as mentors for other residents. The correctional staff includes a corrections officer and a corrections counselor—called “contact officers.” Contact officers help residents with finances, employment, education and navigation to treatment and programming.



[Photo from PennLive.com](#)



Evaluating the Pilot Program

Researchers from Drexel University and the University of Oslo have been following the pilot project from the start. The research is still a work in progress, particularly as the operational phase has not yet been completed. [The evaluation](#) aims to study outcomes both in prison and beyond, with a focus on everything from prison misconduct and environment to recidivism and employment upon release.

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