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# *In-Tents:*

## *A Canvas Incarceration Compound*

*"If our troops in Desert Storm could live in tents, then aren't they good enough for sentenced inmates?"*

*Sheriff Joe Arpaio  
Maricopa County, Arizona*

When Sheriff Joe Arpaio first proposed housing his sentenced inmates in tents, reactions varied from shocked disbelief to thinking he was joking. Both the staff and the public have learned better. You always take this sheriff seriously.

Eight months after assuming office in January 1993, he opened a tent jail with a 1,000 bed capacity. Since then on two occasions, Arpaio himself spent the night with 1000 inmates in the tents to see what it's really like in Tent City.

In the years since, worldwide media, lawmen and politicians (including two presidential candidates) have beaten a path to his door - some in curiosity and more in serious contemplation of their own similar options.

The motivating factors behind this innovative program were jail over crowding, violations of a consent decree, lack of funds for new traditional

structures and a rock solid conviction that courts, not head counts, should determine when an inmate is released from jail. Sheriff Arpaio never wants an officer to hesitate arresting someone based on the idea that there's no room in jail. In fact, he put up a huge pink neon vacancy sign above Tent City to prove he's serious.

Convinced that people in jail should never live better than the public, Arpaio asks his critics, "If our troops in Desert Storm could live in tents, then aren't they good enough for sentenced inmates?"

The program relies heavily on surplus military property for which the Office obtained a Pentagon rule change that allows local government entities to obtain it for little or no costs.

The major construction expenses were thereby reduced to electrical, plumbing and foundation installations. Each tent has evaporative coolers. They were replaced with fans when inmates began short circuiting them.

Staffing on this site is approximately 250 inmates to each officer, a much higher ration than in "hard" facilities. Because of budget restraints, the

tents have only four detention officers guarding 1,000 inmates each shift.

In-Tents has been such a success in terms of housing and saving money that Sheriff Arpaio opened Con-Tents, the second canvas incarceration compound adjacent to a different "hard" facility. And, being an equal opportunity incarcerator, Arpaio had women begin living in Tent City in 1996.

A total of nearly 1600 convicted inmates are now being housed in Arpaio's Tent Cities and all at a mere fraction of the cost of building a new jail.

While Tent City has its critics, no day goes by without Sheriff Arpaio's receiving many expressions of support from around the world for moving the get-tough-on-crime rhetoric into reality.

There is an expression that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." If that is true, then we are indeed flattered, for other sunshine states like Florida and Nevada and Louisiana are now working to begin building their own Tent Cities.