

### Know Your Human Rights

Do you even know what your human rights are? The American Heritage Dictionary defines human rights as: "The basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled often include the right to life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression, and equality before the law."

While people are often unaware of their human rights, they fall victim to tyranny, and despotism. The most frequently violators of human rights are prison officials. From Commissioners, Superintendents, to their deputy minions. The plague continues through the Inner Perimeter Security staff to the over paid correctional officers. Prisoners are look upon as society's out cast, low lifes and scum of the earth. Prison official attitudes and actions are crude, unusual and hostile. How can we stop these violators? The answer is simple. With knowledge and action.

Knowledge is power. The first thing you should know is that human rights is not a priviledge in contrast to the belief of most prison officials. One is entitled to these basic rights. You have the right to adequate medical care. You have the right to protection from assualt. You have the right to humaneliving conditions. You have the right of safty from correctional staff retaliation and abuse. I don't mean just physical, I also mean mental abuse. I've personally witnessed and been a victim of false information being presented through disciplinary reports from correctional staff abusing their authority, which then gets overlooked from higher officials. Priscners are incarcerated for a reason - they have violated the laws of the state or country. The punishment itself is being removed from society and the free world until we have paid our dues. Yet, nowhere in the law does it give authority to prison officials or their staff the power to violate our basic human rights mentioned above, yet it seems the powers who run the prisons failed to read the memo outlining the basic human rights of the incarcercerated.

The law is quite clear when it comes to the right of prisoners, we have the right to adequate medical care; protection from assualts from other prisoners as well as staff and the right to humane living conditions. Yet, these rights which are clearly spelled out in the very handbook thats passed out to every prisoner and are being violated every day on a hourly basis, primarily with medical care. The Department of Corrections (otherwise known to prisoners as The Department of Curruption) is required to offer medical care which conforms to the community standards, yet, their idea of community standards is equal to Third-World County Standards. You see on the news where people are lucky if they are seen by qualified medical professionals.

The very process one must go <sup>through</sup> ~~throu~~ in order to be examined by medical staff should be considered a violation of our human rights when we must submit sick call slips and then jump through hoops all the while being probed by nurses and rescheduled a week or two to see a nurse practioner who in this place is considered to be the doctor. We all know this is not ~~is~~ true but the medical staff processes as such and it is considered legal by correctional officials.

With all due respect to the nursing profession - they are not licensed to perform medical examinations that fall under the requirements of a doctor. By the time a nurse recommends you to a doctor, it is several days to two weeks down the road if you are lucky from your initial complaint and by then your symptoms seem to get worse that affect many other prisoners during the incubation time period leading to a life threatening emergency, all because the first steps were ignored and prevented to be seen by a real doctor who would have prevented the continued symptoms all because of the first stage inadequate medical attention. For example, I can name a few people that suffered this process. Paul was a prisoner here at MCI-Norfolk who complained of having extreme headaches for months. The medical staff seen him and gave him a series of improper medication from aspirin to moctrin (which is considered the cure-all medication here in The Department of Correction). However, it turned out to be brain cancer and he eventually died from it. A second case whom I'll say is Ronald had some outer skin infections that went misdiagnosed and eventually brought to an outside hospital, but not before the infection seaped into his internal organs and compounded his health. These are minor cases and a minimal statement to the actual numbers that medical care is given in a proper and timely manner. These cases are a continued cycle of medical abuse. What is ironic is when you review the same "handbook" that is given to you you will find on page 2 in a square box the words "core values". Under that is five guided words emphasized by being underlined.

#### Commitment To Public Service

##### Responsible

Account for your actions.

##### Respectful

Treat others as you want to be treated--Golden Rule

##### Honest

Having the courage to do the right thing.

##### Caring

How you do your job and the impact it has on others.

The hypocrisy here in the above words is followed by the actions by the medical staff here in this facility and throughout the system that has been pointed out in this letter. As my friend Susan would say: "They are all in on it."

The law is designed to protect prisoners from being assaulted by other prisoners and staff members, yet, it is not applied and runs rampant within facilities like the one I am residing in today. Assaults and abuse is not only physical in nature. Prison staff have unlimited power behind the walls they operate within. Their power is exercised more in the nature of mental abuse verses physical abuse. Not that they do not commit physical abuse on prisoners. However,



correctional staff and administrators routinely violate the very same rules and regulations we prisoners are held to uphold and follow. Yet, they are looked at from the justice system as using the blanket of security to exercise their powers in a justified way, even under a <sup>BLATANT</sup> violation when pointed out by a prisoner and supported by documentation.

Yet, when a prisoner violates any minor rule or regulation they are held to the highest of standards and penalized to the max. Then placed in another segregated portion of the prison for an undetermined amount of time, thus forfeiting his little privileges he gained under human rights, such as educational programs, job assignment and the ability to earn good time for non threatening security violation that are most of the time made up by either a vengful prisoner or staff member. For example, not standing for count, when you didn't even hear the officer make the call. Not <sup>CARRYING</sup> carrying a state issued identification out in the open. Having a bottle of juice or milk in a soda bottle or a little state food in your cell. Having a fan in the window or a book on the window ledge. These are just a small selection of incidents that officers and moreso, Captians seek out just to impose a disciplinary report against an inmate who more than likely will be removed from general population to segregation.

This may be difficult for people to understand simply because you are not locked up nor understand the rules and regulations of the prison system and a free person may do these things as part of their everyday normal schedule and life. Yet, the correctional officers seem to relish in catching these little violations even as they themselves routinely commit infractions, such as, coming into work late, sleeping on the job, using tobacco products (even though this is a violation of the laws of the Commonwealth), not being at their assigned post, causing the unordinary running of the prison, where prisoners miss visits and medical appointments, etc. yet, they do not receive any disciplinary from their <sup>officers</sup> officers or even administrators. These incidents may not seem like much to the Free person, but some of these <sup>Privileges</sup> privileges are all a prisoner looks forward to and may have, to continue his outside support to make it through another day within this system. Prisoners suffer in ways that <sup>Free</sup> people may never understand unless they themselves experience it. Once again our punishment does not call for violations of one's human rights.

Let me reiterate on the officers and how they commit infractions themselves. I personally have been in earshot when one officer said to another officer, "I was yelled at and reprimanded for coming in late, I felt like a prisoner." The second conversation was when I had a court appointment and the correctional officer was telling the other officer to have his brother come into corrections, "this is easy work and we'll never get laid off as these fucking guys will always come back." This is the attitude within the corrections culture. However, an officer makes approximately \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year for being a glorified baby-sitter.

Lastly, a prisoners rights to humane living conditions is being violated on a daily basis. The over-population of prisoners has become the norm in just about every facility in the Commonwealth. The prison I am currently at [MCI-Norfolk] was constructed in 1927 to accomodate approximately 700 prisoners at the very most. At this point in time it is operating at close to 200% over capacity as their is over 1500 men jammed into this 86 year old prison. The very basic infrastructure of the prison simply cannot serve the population as the sewage system backs up monthly, and at times weekly. The water restrictions are implemented during the most humid of times in the year. The quality of the water is continuously bad and rusty. A couple of years ago it was stated that a major water pipe broke. This caused the prison to bring in portable toilets and drinking water. Only to be discovered after a private company came into the facility with a back hoe and dug up a number of places where it was believed there was a broken pipe, only to find out the the actual water presure was no working. All the while, we prisoners were treated like we were in a Third-World Country when handed a gallon jug of water and told that it had to last 24 hours in the middle of summer months, to clean ourselves and otherwise. At the end it was stated to have cost The Department of Corrections close to \$100,000. This is not to state the diseases that had started to occur after-the-fact.

All and all, we prisoners are sentence to confinement as a form of punishment based on the violation of the laws of the Commonwealth. However, our incarceration and sepeartion from society does not mean our basic human rights are taken from us. As I watch the horriable violations of human rights from far away taken place in other areas on T.V., I wonder if the American public have ever taken a second look right here in the prison system that their fellow citizens are placed in? The high walls surrounding this prison is not to keep us in, it is to prevent the citizens from seeing what is really going on within these walls. One never knows how the future can go, you could find yourself looking out from the inside one day or a loved one that you have in your family, if it hasn't happened already. All I'd like to say is don't let that day be the first day to open your eyes to the awareness of human rights. Let this letter be your eye opener to the actual issues that occur on a daily basis that your tax dollars support. If you view this as an investment you would be taking a closer look at it, because for the money coming into this agency, only a very small percentage actually goes into a prisoners rehabilitation and prison conditions. Over 73% goes into the payrolls of the prison staffing. Did you read that? Thats right, 73% pays the staff of a budget close to a BILLION DOLLARS. The Commonwealths education system doesn't even receive anywhere close to that amount. Yet, that is the gateway to our future leaders.

Let today become your first day to advocate for the full human rights of the lost citizens whose voices have been stifled through corruption and abuse of rights where even the media are refused entrance or access to documents that should be considered Public Records. In closing, I'd like to give special thanks to Susan Mortimer, Barbara J. Dougan, Andrea Hornbein, Nancy Ahmadifar. These women have made it their special lifes project to shead light into a place

And SUSAN HUSKINS.



where most citizens refuse to look. To me these women are gifts from heaven that shine their care and concerns upon the down-trodden. Thank you is still not enough to say for the work these women do ~~do~~ within the prison system.

By Michael Gomes,