

Daniel Gwynn Blog Update

Date: 8/17/13

Subject: "DOJ Visit"

We had a visit from Department of Justice representatives last week, they were investigating the conditions of confinement for documented mentally ill prisoners. There was a prominent display of DOC/DOJ administration down front talking amongst themselves for about a half hour or so. Their attention was then turned to a select handful of prisoners so they could ask them a bunch of probing questions as to their confinement--as if they really cared. Nothing much ever come of these investigations. They've all known for a long time that these mentally ill prisoners did not belong in the RHU or death row, and yet, 18 years later they're still here.

I believe they're here because of a lawsuit filed (Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania v. Wetzel), on behalf of the mentally ill prisoners to address 8th Amendment violations perpetrated by the DOC. These prisoners are confined in RHUs under horrific conditions that takes no account of --and exacerbates--their mental illness. RHU prisoners are locked in extremely small cells 24/7, under constant illumination, denied adequate mental health care, and have only the most minimal contact with other human beings.

Prolonged isolation exacerbates their symptoms which can include refusing to leave their cells, declining medical treatment, sleeplessness, hallucinations, paranoia, covering themselves with feces, head banging & suicide. These symptoms are frequently regarded as infractions of prison rules, which results in punishment that causes further deterioration. The DOC knows that these prisoners are being mistreated, and has done very little to ameliorate the risks of serious harm done to these prisoners. There are approximately 11,000 prisoners rated "C" or "D" under the DOC's stability rating system, which reflects that they have a serious illness. Although there's a DOC policy

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Subject: DOJ Visit (cont.)

that permits mental health staff to recommend that prisoners with mental illness be charged from the RHU, their recommendation go ignored, and the prisoners often languish in the RHUs deteriorating for years.

One housing option is a Secure Special Needs Unit (SSNU) designed to care for prisoners with special needs. However, it is the policy & practice of the DOC to have inadequate space in its programs for those who need & qualify for them. As of December 2012, SSNUs had space for only 141 of the approximately 800 prisoners with serious mental illnesses in RHUs in all DOC facilities. Yet despite this extreme shortage of space, approximately 60 of the available beds were empty. The DOC continues to house them in RHUs disregarding the substantial risk of harm

For years, the DOC has known about these issues and has elected to continuously sweep this under the rug. These prisoners are my neighbors, and it's heartbreaking to see their deterioration and not be able to help them. Many have attempted suicide to escape their suffering, and only a few has succeeded. When will the DOC step up and take responsibility for their charges, and not just sit back and collect a pay check.

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