

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

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Get Naked to Get a Visit

Since July of last year, I have been strip searched 55 times - because that's how many times I've received a visit. Stanley is the only medium security prison in the state that strip searches every prisoner after every visit. The Wisconsin Administrative Code permits strip searches after visits but it envisions the appropriate exercise of discretion in deciding when to strip prisoners. It is bizarre that the prison administration in Stanley has decided that every prisoner who gets a visit must be humiliated after each visit.

In my opinion, this policy has nothing to do with security and everything to do with discouraging visitation. I have spoken to numerous prisoners who either say they are glad no one comes to see them or that they have told their families not to come to visit because of the strip search policy. I think it is a matter of expediency. The visiting area is so small, if more than a small percentage of prisoners received regular visits, the facilities would not be big enough to accommodate all the visits. Strip searches deter visits, plain and simple.

Until last week, I endured the strip searches without any comment. Get naked, get looked at, get dressed. Silly, petty, but no big deal. But a different officer conducted the search and imposed a new twist - to turn around naked and squat down. For some reason, this added indignity upset me. It felt like he was forcing me to perform a perverted homosexual sex show for him. In my 31 years in prison, this is the only time I have ever had to do this. I felt humiliated and ashamed afterward. It made me feel like I had been sexually molested.

I filed a complaint with the security director under the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA). I expected to have the officer counseled and told not to do that any more. Instead, when I was interviewed by a lieutenant and unit manager, I was told that it was standard procedure which was taught to new officers at the DOC academy. I responded by saying just because the DOC taught it to rookies did not mean it was not in violation of the PREA. They told me that I was entitled to my opinion, but that there was nothing wrong with the procedure.

I beg to differ. Forcing a man to turn his back on another man and squat down naked in front of him serves no legitimate security purpose. It is designed solely to humiliate the prisoner and establish sexual dominance over him. If strip searches were conducted rarely and based on a legitimate security need, then the degradation and humiliation would be tolerable, albeit unconscionable. But I get visits every week, sometimes several times per week. To have to endure that indignity week in and week out is reprehensible.

To be honest, if not for the unhappiness it would cause my visitor, I would become one of the guys who refused to receive any more visits at Stanley just to avoid the strip searches.

It's time to stop the routine degradation and humiliation of prisoners in Stanley just because they are fortunate enough to receive visits.