

Petition: Penitentiary needs to be investigated

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Groups want govt, to look into inmate abuse claims

By Marcia Moore

The Daily Item

Nearly 40 civil and human rights, mental health and religious organizations are calling for a federal investigation into alleged inmate abuse at the U.S. Penitentiary at Lewisburg.

A letter delivered Monday to U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch petitioning her to request the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General launch an investigation into the Bureau of Prisons' (BOP) practices at Lewisburg, including housing inmates in double cells for 23 hours a day, the alleged prolonged use of hard restraints and lack of mental health treatment, was sent by the National Religious Campaign Against Torture.

Describing "harrowing allegations of abuse and torture" the letter was endorsed by 37 organizations, including the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Southern Poverty Center, American Civil Liberties Association and National Council of Churches.

"Prolonged isolated confinement has been defined as torture by the United Nations and is widely opposed by medical and mental health professionals and leading corrections officials' said the Rev. Laura Markle Downton, director of U.S. Prisons Policy and Program at the National Religious Campaign Against Torture. "With bipartisan momentum building at the state-level for humane alternatives to restrictive housing, reported conditions at USP Lewisburg call for swift intervention and accountability."

Prison officials have said all complaints are taken seriously and steps have been taken to ensure the safety of all 1,000 inmates housed in the SMU, prison staff and the public.

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A joint National Public Radio and Marshall Project report in October on alleged abuse of inmates inside the Special Management Unit (SMU) at U.S. Penitentiary at Lewisburg, which included allegations reported by The Daily Item for years since the SMU was established at the facility in 2009 to hold the most dangerous or difficult to manage inmates in the country, prompted the call for an investigation.

At least four inmates have been killed by cellmates in seven years, pushing the rate of assault at Lewisburg six times higher than federal prisons nationwide.

Several lawsuits filed by Lewisburg inmates are pending against the BOP including a suit filed by Sebastian Richard who claims he was left in restraints for 28 days in 2011 when he refused to accept a cellmate he feared.

"By any measure, this is a facility in crisis that requires greater oversight, transparency and accountability to ensure humane and lawful conditions of confinement," the letter to Lynch said.

Dave Sprout, paralegal with the inmate advocacy group, the Lewisburg Prison Project, has been calling for an independent investigation into alleged mistreatment of inmates at the facility for years. He hopes national attention

will spur action.

“We hope that the Justice Department (and) Congress will look into the inhumane conditions that have persisted at USP Lewisburg’s SMU since 2009,” he said. BOP staff and administration should be held accountable for any violations of BOP policy, for any violations of the constitution and any possibly criminal conduct. We do not believe the BOP will investigate their own so either the Attorney General or Congress needs to investigate the practices that have been ongoing at USP Lewisburg.”

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— A letter to Attorney General Loretta Lynch