

Lawsuit: Mentally ill mistreated in prisons

By Marcia Moore

The Daily item

The Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania on Monday filed a federal lawsuit alleging the state Department of Corrections mistreats hundreds of seriously mentally ill inmates by placing them in solitary confinement without adequate health care.

The Disability Rights Network, designated under federal law to protect the rights of people with disabilities, alleges the state Department of Corrections places about 800 men and women with serious mental illnesses in restric-

tive housing units knowing prolonged isolations worsens their mental condition.

"This is a vile and inhumane way to treat people with mental illness," said Network attorney Robert W. Meek.

Some inmates are placed in cells as small as 80 square feet for 23 hours a day with minimal human contact and inadequate mental health care, he said.

These prisoners are often punished for violations of prison rules that are a result of the symptoms and manifestations of their mental ill-

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ness, he said.

"As one judge put it, solitary confinement for a person with mental illness is like an airless room for an asthmatic," Meek said. "Pennsylvania should give these prisoners beds in units designed to help people with mental illness, not devastate them."

Department of Corrections press secretary Susan McNaughton declined to comment on the litigation.

The lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania seeks an injunction requiring the Department of Corrections to adopt a disciplinary process that takes into account prisoners' mental illness and

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provide them with adequate mental health care.

The lawsuit "just scratches the surface" of a widespread problem, said David Sprout, a paralegal with Lewisburg Prison Project, an inmate advocacy group.

"Prisons are predicated on rules. It's a structured environment, but what if (an inmate) can't follow the rules?"

he asked. "Prison staff will call it a behavioral issue when it's a mental health issue."

One state inmate has racked up an additional 11 years on his sentence for failing to follow prison rules, which Sprout said is likely a result of mental problems.

Most of the letters sent to the Lewisburg Prison Project are from inmates concerned

about the mental health of a fellow prisoner, he added.

According to the lawsuit, about 11,000, or 22 percent, of Pennsylvania's inmates suffer from serious mental illness, but they make up about 33 percent of the population held in restrictive housing units. Prisoners confined in these conditions suffer hallucinations, paranoia, sleeplessness and attempt suicide, sometimes successfully.

"The result is a Dickensian nightmare, in which many prisoners, because of their mental illness, are trapped in an endless cycle of isolation and punishment, further deterioration of their mental illness, deprivation of adequate mental health treatment, and inability to qualify for parole," the suit said.

The American Psychiat-

ric Association and National Commission on Correctional Health Care advocates against housing prisoners with serious mental illness

in segregated units without an evaluation to determine whether such placement would be harmful, the Disability Rights Network said.

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