

Federal penitentiary inmates down by 500

Advocate hopes drop will reduce abuse complaints

By Marcia Moore
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LEWISBURG — About 500 fewer inmates are being housed in the Lewisburg Penitentiary's Special Management Unit, and one local inmate advocate hopes it will lead to fewer abuse complaints.

Lewisburg prison spokesman Shawn Barlett said there are

about 600 inmates in the SMU program, down from about 1,160 a year ago.

The U.S. Bureau of Prisons announced plans in August to limit the time inmates spend in the SMU program, which is designed to rehabilitate the most violent or disruptive prisoners from across the country.

Following recommendations by the Justice Department to curb the overuse of solitary confinement, the bureau now limits inmates in the program

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to 24 consecutive months.

Barlett said, "With the policy change, (inmates) are getting out sooner."

It has taken time to relocate inmates to the general population in other federal prisons, but Barlett said local officials have caught up and are now holding steady with about 600 inmates moving through the program at any one time.

In addition to the inmates in the SMU program, the penitentiary houses about 190 other high-risk prisoners inside the walls.

"It won't get much lower," Barlett said, adding that the Lewisburg SMU will continue to rehabilitate some of the most violent and disruptive prisoners from other federal prisons.

"The program is still needed."

David Sprout, a paralegal with the Lewisburg Prison Project, an inmate advocacy group, hopes that such a significant reduction of inmates being held in restrictive housing will lower the violent incidents that have arisen at the prison since it was converted to an SMU in 2009.

Until the recent policy change, Sprout said, some inmates had been held in the SMU for four to five years for allegedly failing to complete the three-phase program. The program has required inmates to be held in two-man cells for up to 24 hours a day, a practice the Lewisburg Prison Project has called "cruel and unusual."

And, with fewer inmates in the restrictive housing, he said there should be ample cell space to permit inmates who express concerns about bunking with a

cellmate to be housed elsewhere or alone.

"We should not be getting any more complaints about bunking issues," said Sprout, referring to pending lawsuits and allegations of excessive force and overuse of restraints against inmates who have refused to move into a cell with an inmate they fear.

Bureau of Prisons and Lewisburg Penitentiary representatives deny claims of inmate abuse.

While there are fewer inmates in the SMU program, Barlett said, staff at the prison remains the same and is not expected to change.

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