

Inmate claims guard opening lawsuit filings

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By Francis Scarcella
and Rick Dandes
The Daily Item

SUNBURY — A Northumberland County inmate involved in a \$1.6 million class-action lawsuit against the county prison has filed a complaint alleging that guards were opening his legal mail and reading the documents.

Inmate Angel Espada alleges corrections officers told him a guard identified only

as “Lois” opened an envelope containing a document related to the class-action lawsuit, court documents said. The new claim was filed March 27 in U.S. Middle District Court in Scranton.

Earlier, Espada and seven other inmates filed a lawsuit claiming that prison inmates are subjected to inhumane conditions, racial discrimination, retaliation and cruel and unusual punishment by

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guards. In his complaint, Espada also claims his legal document was given to Commander Brian Wheary, one of the defendants in the class-action lawsuit.

Espada said because Wheary is named in the lawsuit he should not be looking at the documents, court records state.

The eight inmates involved in the class-action lawsuit seek a transfer to another prison, \$200,000 each, release from segregation and for the county to correct and improve prison conditions.

Dave Sprout, a paralegal with the Lewisburg Prison Project, said: "It is my understanding that if the mail is properly marked 'legal mail,' then they should open it in front of the inmate. It doesn't matter who is named in the lawsuit, it just can't be read."

County Commissioner Vinny Clausi was furious to learn of the latest court filing. Clausi has called for

the construction of a new prison.

"I warned everyone that these lawsuits were coming," he said. "It is only a matter of time before we see more. We can't keep this up. I am very afraid for the people of Northumberland County right now because I have a feeling we are going to be paying a severe price."

Clausi refused to talk about a series of visits he made to the county prison last week.

"All I can say is I will be addressing some of these issues at the prison board meeting," he said. Building a new prison is something Clausi said can't be delayed.

"We must act and we must act now," he said. "No more delaying, no more playing politics. There is a problem at this jail and we need to find a permanent solution."

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Clausi will be evaluating the staff at the jail after the recent allegations, he said.

"This is one thing after another," he said. "Something must be done with this prison. We need to look at all of these and we need to find a solution."

Commissioner Steve Bridy, the prison board chairman, declined to comment on the litigation.

Other inmates involved in the class-action lawsuit are Jason Mercado, Hakeem Jefferson, Timothy Tyler, Tyrone Short, Katone Walker, Matthew Romero and Robert Perez.

Defendants, in addition to Wheary, are Warden Roy Johnson; Lts. Jim Smink, Jason Carl and Michael Walburn; and Sgts. Michael Gibbs, Krista Brouse and Joshua Lehman.

The Northumberland County Prison Board is scheduled to meet at 11 a.m. today in the prison.

■ Email comments to
fscarcella@dailyitem.com.

Thank You

My wife and I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone in the Amish Road section of Winfield of Rt. 304. We knocked on your door Easter morning, asking for your help to find our dog who was lost. We handed you a flyer with our phone number and Otis's description and everyone was so nice and helpful. We wanted you to know that we found Otis with the help of your neighbor Mr. and Mrs. Hixon. Everyone was so kind and many were concerned about our friend who could not find his way home. He is safe now, and my wife and I thank everyone very much for their time and compassion.
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