



Dauphin County
file

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DAUPHIN COUNTY

Inmates' relatives air claims of abuse

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BY GARRY LENTON
Of The Patriot-News

One by one, they went to the microphone to tell a story about the Dauphin County Prison, and none of it was pretty.

There was the woman whose son died there four years ago by suicide. Linda Smith said the autopsy showed signs that the young man had been beaten, possibly with batons.

"I have nothing left but memories and pictures," she said.

Laurie Strobel talked about her niece, who she said was beaten April 29 by six corrections officers, two of them men, for refusing to take her medication and strip in front of male guards.

"I saw the evidence she was abused," Strobel said.

Phyllis Bennett told the audience that her son, Charles, was beaten and choked into unconsciousness with his own shirt. The district attorney's office is investigating her allegations.

The three were among nearly 100 people who attended a town meeting last night at Martin Luther King Baptist Church at 1501 Market St. to air their concerns about the county prison.

County officials said they are aware of the perception of problems at the prison and share residents' concerns.

No members of the prison board attended last night's meeting.

The meeting was organized by a coalition of groups operating under the name County Prison Watch. The coalition includes the Lewisburg Prison Project, the Pennsylvania Prison Society and the American Civil Liberties Union.

The meeting was set up to address rising concerns about allegations that inmates are being abused by prison officers. Though the complaints have been around for years, the number and frequency have increased in recent months, drawing the ire of clergy, such as the Rev. LaVette Paige, pastor of Martin Luther King.

District Attorney Edward M. Marsico Jr.'s office is investigating eight allegations of abuse by corrections officers this year, three more than in all of last year. Marsico is a member of the prison board.

"Things have been going on for a long time, and it's time to do something," Paige said. "No one should be beaten. No one should be abused when they walk in that prison."

Six members of the Harrisburg clergy called on the county prison board this month to investigate claims of abuse. Board members acknowledged they had heard similar complaints and noted the ongoing investigations.

Last night, 23 people lined up to speak.

Many, such as Strobel, described what they said had happened to their children and pledged to keep demanding answers from Warden Dominick DeRose.

"I'm not going away," Strobel said. "All those that did it [the abuse] should be right there with the rest of the inmates."

Others, such as Dave Johnson of Harrisburg, talked about conditions at the prison -- he alleged overcrowding, mice, rats and other vermin.

Speakers called for better medical services at the prison.

The Rev. Miah Gonzalez-Williams, of the interfaith group Mind of Christ Ministries, demanded better services for the mentally ill. Mental illness is common in inmate populations.

The speakers called for members of the community to join to bring about change.

Although no prison board members attended the meeting, three county employees were present: Diane McNaughton, the county press secretary; Terry Davis, director of Adult Probation; and John Goshert, chief of the district attorney's Criminal Investigation Division. Goshert's office investigates allegations of abuse at the prison.

McNaughton and Davis said they attended in an unofficial capacity.

Goshert said he read about the meeting and hoped he would hear something that would aid investigations.

"The problem we run into is people not wanting to cooperate," he said.

He described the speakers as well-meaning and said his office was checking into complaints.

"If there are bad apples out there, they need to be plucked off the tree," Goshert said.

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