

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Monthly Inmate Deaths this Summer at Federal Penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

Lewisburg, PA – September 9, 2010 –

Three inmates suffered violent deaths at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania's federal penitentiary between May and July of this year. Two of the deaths allegedly resulted from assaults by the victim's cellmate. In both cases, one cellmate was handcuffed, while the other was not. This is standard operating procedure in the Special Management Unit (SMU) set up in 2008. When two inmates are returned to their shared cell, one inmate inserts his hands through a slot in the locked cell door to have his cuffs removed, while the other cellmate waits with his hands still locked in cuffs. A similar procedure is used with 3-5 inmates while entering and exiting the recreation area.

The third death purportedly resulted from pepper gas that guards shot into the cell of an asthmatic inmate, to break up what the guards suspected to be an assault. When a cellmate attack does occur, many prisoners state that the prison staff "fails to protect" the assaulted cellmate. The staff response procedure at the Lewisburg SMU includes shooting rubber bullets and pepper gas into the cell until both men willingly handcuff themselves.

SMU programs exist in only three Federal Penitentiaries nationwide. Lewisburg's Special Management Unit takes disruptive or aggressive prisoners from the other 177 Bureau of Prisons (BOP) institutions. By centralizing these prisoners in Lewisburg, the other prisons may be less violent. But conditions in Lewisburg set up an almost guaranteed cycle of violence putting inmates and the guards at risk.

The Lewisburg SMU is significantly more restrictive than the general inmate population facilities. Inmates are held in their cells 23-24 hours per day, with only one hour of recreation, five days per week. Two inmates occupy each cell and an inmate may not refuse a cellmate who they perceive as a threat to their safety or their life.

The violence and almost total lockdown cannot prepare these inmates for returning to life on the "outside". It also strains the prison staff who daily work with people who are effectively caged like animals without adequate psychological counseling, work assignments, exercise, and preparation for eventual release from prison.

Over a dozen Lewisburg inmates have written to the Lewisburg Prison Project (LPP) in 2010 reporting their own serious assaults by cellmates, including blows to the head and multiple stab wounds requiring months of hospitalization. Hundreds of letters from Lewisburg prisoners describe the daily fear of death and disfigurement that inmates feel is almost certain under the current design of the SMU program. The LPP has attempted to address the Bureau of Prisons concerning the plethora of flaws in the SMU program. Recently, LPP was, for the first time, denied their request to tour the Lewisburg facility.

The Lewisburg Prison Project, Inc. is a non-profit organization that believes that we should uphold constitutional and human rights promised to all, including those inside prisons. LPP provides legal and other assistance to prisoners on issues stemming from their conditions of confinement by corresponding with and visiting inmates, contacting prison authorities on behalf of prisoners, and providing inmates with legal bulletins summarizing Court rulings on prisoner's rights. In 2009, the Lewisburg Prison Project answered nearly 3000 letters from inmates with concerns such as their rights to safety and medical care.

While it is important for the prison system to keep the public safe, the inmates also have the right to personal safety while serving their sentence. These policies and procedures used to select the inmates and enter them into the SMU must be revisited by the Bureau of Prisons for the safety of both the inmates and the prison staff.

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The restrictive nature of the SMU program has seemingly resulted in a higher level of inmate on inmate violence and raises questions of the long-term effect of the SMU program on prisoners as they re-enter society. The BOP claims in their Vision Statement that, “Through the provision of health care, mental, spiritual, educational, vocational, and work programs, inmates are well-prepared for a productive and crime-free return to society.” This Vision Statement is currently not a reality in the SMU program. Ninety-six percent of the Federal Prison population will eventually re-enter society. Without an environment focused on self-improvement, what kind of citizens will the inmates become as they return to their communities?

The Lewisburg Prison Project is a non-profit organization that advocates for prisoners’ constitutional and human rights. www.lewisburgprisonproject.org

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