

# Inmates with psych issues rise

## Advocates: Isolation leads to problems, care needed

By Marcia Moore  
*The Daily Item*

The number of inmates coming into the Northumberland County Prison with mental health problems has risen over the years and has caused staff to work differently, Brian Wheary, commander of the Sunbury jail, said.

All inmates are classified when they enter the prison and are kept from the general population if they have severe mental problems.

"One out of 10 have some issues or concerns. They may just be minor mental issues, but we are seeing more," Wheary said, attributing increased drug use to some of it.

It's an issue facing county, state and federal prisons

across the nation and one that has Northumberland County treatment court liaison Glenda Bonetti wondering whether the cause is situational.

"Are these inmates going in already on psychotropic medication, or are they depressed and anxiety-ridden because they're in jail?" she asked.

### Network suit fights for care

A class-action lawsuit filed in March by the Disability Rights Network of Pennsylvania accuses the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections of cruel and unusual punishment for keeping hundreds of inmates suffering from severe mental problems

Please see **INMATES**

# Inmates with psych issues rise

**INMATES**, from Page A1

in isolation for long periods rather than providing medical care.

Similar suits have been filed throughout the country over the past few years.

Bonetti believes a fairly small number of people entering the jail system suffer from severe mental problems, but people who are predisposed to having issues could develop them if they're in custody for a prolonged period of time.

She counsels a former inmate who spent nearly all of a 15-year state prison sentence in solitary confinement in a neighboring state who developed serious mental issues as a result. After his release, the man returned to his hometown in Northumberland County and is receiving services.

"He wasn't mentally ill before he went to jail," Bonetti said. His newly developed mental issues are making it even more difficult for him to break back into society as a law-abiding citizen, she said.

"There obviously needs to be more mental services in the justice system," she said. "People need to be educated that we'll save taxpayer dollars providing inmates these services because we can't institutionalize them forever."

## **Paralegal: 23 hours in cell too long**

David Sprout, a paralegal with the Lewisburg Prison Project, an inmate advocacy group, concurs.

The group opposes the way federal inmates held in special management units at the Lewisburg Penitentiary are kept in isolation for 23 hours a day in a tiny two-man cell.

Sprout said the conditions also can exacerbate an inmate's fragile mental state, creating an even more dangerous situation for inmates and prison employees.

One state prisoner Sprout has been corresponding with has had 12 additional years added to his sentence because he breaks prison rules, a violation he claims is due to

the inmate's mental illness.

"Prisons are predicated on rules, that's the way they're structured. But what if you can't follow the rules?" Sprout asked.

Mentally ill inmates pose a problem for correctional officers who try to maintain order in the jail, Wheary said.

"If you smash a light bulb or destroy county property, you would be disciplined," Wheary said. Now the officer has to determine why the inmate caused the damage and whether it was the result of mental infirmity.

"Positive reinforcements don't work with someone with mental health issues. It's hard to set goals with them," he said.

## **Criminals vs. mentally ill**

The root of the problem is distinguishing criminals who need to be punished and people who commit crime and need help, Lycoming County public defender William Miele said.

Miele along with attorney Edward "E.J." Rymysza has represented several defendants with varying degrees of mental illness over the years, including Joel Snider, the suspected gunman in yoga master Sudharman's July 2010 killing in New Berlin, and convicted Sunbury double killer Michael Harrell.

The number of people entering jails and prisons with severe mental problems hasn't increased, Miele said, but the public's understanding of the disease has.

Rymysza said mental health treatment court, offered to nonviolent offenders with mental issues in many counties across the state including Northumberland, is a step in the right direction.

"You can't fault prisons because many inmates don't want help," Miele said. "Prisons are not the place people get rehabilitated."

Eventually, though, mentally ill inmates who have languished in prison for years with little or no treatment will be released.

"Just like guns, as long as people are motivated by fear we won't deal with it," Miele said.