

Food and water deprivation, abuse and overcrowding in Michigan's women's prison

By Naomi Spencer
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A pair of statements issued by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and three inmates at the Women's Huron Valley Correctional Facility describe widespread human rights abuses in Michigan's only women's prison. Overcrowding, the regular use of forced restraint and tasers, forced nudity, and the withholding of food water, and sanitation are among the complaints.

The ACLU statement, issued to the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) in July and obtained by the *Ann Arbor News* this week, charges that the prison subjected mentally ill inmates to "barbaric and unconstitutional" conditions tantamount to torture. "Witnesses have reported seeing mentally ill prisoners denied water and food, 'hog tied' naked for many hours, left to stand, sit or lie naked in their own feces and urine, denied showers for days and tasered," ACLU of Michigan Executive Director Kary Moss wrote.

Inmates in solitary confinement were denied water, the ACLU states. When prisoners begged guards for water, the *Ann Arbor News* reports, they "failed to provide it for hours, and possibly days, in some cases."

One prisoner was left brain dead from the abuse, according to the ACLU. "At least one mentally ill inmate who experienced these abuses, specifically water and food deprivation and poor sanitation, was transferred to an outside hospital last month after she was found non-responsive in her cell," Moss wrote. "Through various sources, we understand she has since been pronounced brain dead."

The statement describes another prisoner being "hog tied" by a guard. "One inmate, who pleaded with a guard to help a mentally ill prisoner who was crying naked on the floor and unable to move—because her feet were cuffed to her hands behind her back—was told that

her fellow prisoner would have to stay like that for two hours or more, because she had not learned to behave."

A separate statement was filed as a formal grievance with MDOC by three Huron Valley inmates. The inmates describe being held, along with another woman, in an 8- by 12-foot cell that used to be a "chemical caustic closet" because of overcrowding. The prison was built to hold up to 2,143, but officials have not released the current population count. Inmates in the cellblock known as Dickinson A, where the closet is located, are reportedly housed in extremely cramped conditions on a regular basis.

"The cell I'm in is inadequately small for myself and three others, and there are not enough lockers, no privacy, inadequate desks and chairs, and there is no ventilation," wrote one prisoner.

That statement, also obtained by the *Ann Arbor News*, was made in the form of an appeal in February after an initial grievance was rejected by the state on the grounds that more than one inmate had "filed a grievance about the same issue, and therefore the grievance was discarded." At the time, MDOC stated, "Two or more prisoners and/or parolees may not jointly file a single grievance regarding an issue of mutual impact, or submit identical individual grievances regarding a given issue as an organized protest. Such grievances will be rejected by the grievance coordinator."

In response to the February appeal, MDOC claimed that the cell was fine. "All prisoners housed in Dickinson unit have been treated humanely and with dignity in matters of health care, personal safety and general living conditions," the department declared.

Conditions in the Huron Valley facility have long been deplorable. In 2012, the ACLU filed a letter signed by 34 human rights and legal organizations

calling for the end of “sexually humiliating” and unsanitary strip searches by guards that was contributing to both infections and mental health trauma among prisoners, many of whom had suffered sexual abuse. A class action lawsuit in 2009 on behalf of over 900 women who said they were sexually abused by guards resulted in the implementation of a female-only staffing policy at Huron Valley.

Michigan Women’s Justice and Clemency Project director Carol Jacobsen told the *News* that abuse was “heavy” in the prison, in part because of what the newspaper described as “the near-impossibility of civilian accessibility.” Jacobsen said she had been unable to see the prison’s living quarters for years. Meeting with inmates, she said, nevertheless made clear that the conditions were contributing to an epidemic of mental illness.

“It’s gone on for years,” Jacobsen said of the use of solitary confinement. “I’ve been documenting it with various women for years. A lot of these women, they throw them in segregation for months on end, are mentally ill ... and then they deteriorate. It’s horrible to see them deteriorate.”

Michigan prisons, like prisons across the United States, are pits of abuse, misery and disease. They are also a rich source of profit for corporations.

The food service company Aramark, for example, enjoys a \$145 million contract with MDOC to provide meal service to the state prisons. Last month, the state of Michigan fined the company \$200,000 for “errors” that included widespread food shortages, inadequately trained employees, lax management of utensils such as knives, and serving food that was spoiled and infested with maggots. Aramark reports an annual revenue of \$13.5 billion.

As the economy of Michigan has deteriorated and social infrastructure spending has been axed, the incarceration rate, length of prison terms, and government spending on prisons have all soared. Over the past several decades, the largest area of economic growth in Michigan has been in its \$2 billion-a-year prison system.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, Michigan devotes a larger portion of its state general fund budget to prisons than any other state. In 1980, corrections accounted for 3 percent of the state budget; in 2013, Michigan expended fully 21 percent of

spending on prisons.

The state also leads the nation in average time served, at 4.3 years, according to a 2012 study by Pew Charitable Trusts. Nationally, the average sentence is 2.9 years. Pew researchers estimated that the lengthening of sentences, especially since the implementation of “truth-in-sentencing” laws in 1998, have cost some \$472 million in public funds. The truth-in-sentencing policy eliminates the possibility of early parole for prisoners who show good behavior and a desire to reform, meaning that the minimum sentence set by a judge stands as the least amount of time a prisoner must serve.

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