

Testimony of Tracie Bernardi in Support of HB 7302, An Act Concerning Isolated Confinement and Correctional Staff Training and Wellness

Every cell has a window at York even in solitary, I know because out of the 23 years served in Prison, and I spent 7 years straight locked away in solitary.

I remember watching out the window as prison compound life went on without me, I would wish myself dead. To see the other woman heading to and from the chow hall, medical, work, school and visits. Every time I saw a friend I'd bang madly on the window knowing they could not see me because the windows are darkly tinted. Administration tinted the windows while the buildings were being refaced. The warden promised they would come down immediately after construction ended. The tints are still up. Construction ended four years ago.

There is a reason the tints are being kept up.

Administration recognized the power in sun-deprivation. Without vitamin D women at York would be too lethargic to act out. When I left York I had such a severe deficiency that I needed to be infused with 5000 milligram Vitamin D for three months.

I want to introduce you to something I call "Induced sleep deprivation through use of other human torture tactics." I am talking about the control tactics implemented in Solitary confinement by the correctional guards.

You may have been told Solitary Confinement no longer exists but rather than abolish it, the department of correction simply disguised it with a new name—Restrictive Housing. Whatever anyone wants it to be called, it is a place of deprivation—one is deprived of sun, a clear mind, food, good hygiene, and sleep as well as the obvious human contact/communication.

Just as Sun-deprivation is a means of control, the institution has a single APRN on hire who serves in the capacity of a psychiatrist. This man will give you whatever you ask for. Women who are addicts think, he's cool for that. He's the go to guy but what women don't realize is their drug addictions are being exploited, the administration preys on it—in order to guarantee complete submission.

I am among the many who requested and received psych meds in order to sleep. I assumed because an APRN ordered them and knew my medical history they were safe. When I came home my doctor discontinued my medication because she said with my heart condition I should have never been on them in the first place. I have been on that particular drug for about 18 years of my incarceration! One might suggest I have grounds for a lawsuit. However there is a state law C.G.S.A. 18-85a, a law that started being enforced in 2001 that renders a lawsuit pointless, because basically if a former inmate is left, wins or is awarded any windfall of money the state is entitled to the funds. This applies to lawsuit winnings, inheritances and/or winning the lottery. A former inmate is subject to re-pay all incarceration fees. This keeps former inmates from suing which is why many of the things that take place at York are never reported.

The food we are served in prison is deprives us of the nutritional content which our bodies require, not just because it's overcooked but in solitary where one is fed through the slot trap on your door—there is a new way Women are deprived of food. This is Induced self-starvation. There are guards who actually force half staved inmates to refuse their trays. I'd hear the guards at neighboring cells, tell woman, "I spit in your food!" or "wait 'til you taste what I did to your tray."

The guard would have that person's tray marked with their name on it. To convince the inmate further that her tray was tampered with. Of course the inmate refuses her tray, the guard tells the inmate "ok I'm putting it in the log that I offered you your tray and you refused it." I witnessed this type of scenario too many times to count.

In solitary one is allowed to shower three times a week. Saturdays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Sometimes guards on shift change would tell the next shift you already had you shower, so you wait all day, and finally you would realize the whole tier showered but you, so you ask why they skipped you and your told, first shift said you already got your shower. If it's been two days since last shower now it's four days. It made no difference whether you were menstruating or not. We also were forced to wear the same dirty uniform for a week straight. Our bed linen would be cleaned once a month.

I can remember when I was in solitary there was no door on the shower stall on my tier so we had to take showers in handcuffs for about a year until they finally put up a door. Imagine showering in handcuffs, try it tie your hands together with a sock and shower—see how clean you get. Not to mention you get one miniature hotel size soap a week along with one miniature shampoo, deodorant and toothpaste. This forced us into bad hygiene which is another control tactic. When you keep someone dirty, deprive them of sunlight or fresh air, on top of over medicating an inmate this sends them into deep depression, and as you know depression calls for sleep.

But how easy to sleep is it when the guards have to do 15 minute tours and some like to bang on your door or kick it every time they walk by. Sometimes they leave the light in your room on all night and then if they catch you with the blanket over your head they wake you up and order you to remove it. At other times a guard would go someone's cell and take a sneaker from them and put it in the tier dryer so we would be forced to hear the clunking of the shoe as it tossed wildly against the dryer walls for a 60 minute dryer cycle.

Guards would also leave our tier or cell intercom on which beeped loudly incessantly every 15 seconds. They also would do a late night cell shakedown wake you up out of a dead sleep, tear your cell apart then tie your linen in knots that would take you hours to get out, before you could finally try to go back to sleep.

Finally I hung myself, but it didn't change a thing and after my recovery they sent me right back to the clutches of solitary. I had to finish up my last two years there.

Suicide is common at York. Too common, sadly if you were depressed in solitary and wanted to talk to a social worker before things got to the boiling point you could not. Crisis

would only will see you if you say you are suicidal. One must lie to get seen then you are handcuffed shackles and brought to the max side and put in the stripped cell J2 on the max side. No linen. Just you in dirty cell that the dust accumulates like dryer lint, a dirty bare mattress, a tinted window that you can only see out because desperate woman scratched through small portions to peel off the inner tinting, and to top it off The guards make you wait until the following shift to be seen. When its protocol to call crisis in mental health the moment someone threatens to hurt themselves. Sometimes you are locked in the room so long you lie and say you are better but they tell you must be seen and have to wait until they feel like calling. The guards do this to deter us from asking to talk to somebody, so when woman are really suicidal they are afraid to tell a staff.

This person Tracy who lived but has severe brain damage and is in a convalescent home, hung herself her cellmate woke up and found her. She tried to beep her intercom but Guards purposely shut our intercoms off so they don't have to do any extra work and sometimes just to torture us so if we are menstruating and need a pad we are forced to wait, if we need toilet paper we are forced to hold it. In this instance if the intercom was on Tracy might have been saved. Woman had to jointly scream and practically kick down our cell doors to get the guards' attention, by the time a guard responded Tracy already lost too much oxygen.

