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by Juan Moreno Haines | February 11, 2021

The following piece is written by Juan Moreno Haines, an award-winning journalist incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison. Haines is an editor at the San Quentin News, a member of the Society of Professional Journalists, a past recipient of a Solitary Confinement Reporting Project grant, and a Contributing Writer at Solitary Watch. Since the COVID-19 outbreak began ravaging San Quentin, Haineswho survived the virus himselfhas written many articles on the subject, and in particular, on how the pandemic has led to an increase in the use of solitary confinement.In this piece, Haines describes how mental health treatment in San Quentin has deteriorated since the start of the pandemic, leaving many people with psychiatric disabilities untreated and locked in isolation. Melat Eskender

The Age of Covid-19 brings a common distress that stems from being separated and then feeling isolated from loved ones. The result, multiple studies show, is more mental health problems. A noteworthy side effect of mass-incarceration is having to provide mental health services toincarcerated people who are separated and isolated. That said, the Covid-19 crisis at San Quentin that infected three-quarters of the prisoner population and killed 28, as well as a correctional officer, changed how prison officials provide treatment to prisoners experiencing mental illness.

Willie Earl Burrell, 39, began serving his sentence in a dormitory that corrections experts in mental health designated forindividuals in the Enhanced Outpatient Program (EOP). EOP prisoners are deemed unable to function in the general population.

Prison officials classify EOP prisoners as those who demonstrate inability to program in work or education assignments, or other correctional activities such as religious services, self-help programming, canteen, recreational activities, visiting, etc. as a consequence of a serious mental disorder or,

The presence of dysfunctional or disruptive social interaction including withdrawal, bizarre, or disruptive behavior, extreme argumentativeness, inability to respond to others, inappropriate sexual behavior, etc. as a consequence of serious mental disorder.

An impairment in the activities of daily living including eating, grooming and personal hygiene maintenance of housing area, and ambulation, as a consequence of serious mental disorder.

Prison officials say EOP provides care to prisoners who would benefit from the structure of a therapeutic environment that is less restrictive than inpatient settings.

When I first got to the H-Unit dorm, it was cool and I was comfortable with the EOP program. I got into it, the 64, 285 lbs., Burrell said. I started understanding about my issues and problems of being anti-social and disliking people and anger why I had authority figure problems, soft-spoken, he continued, those issues are still going on because Im not getting the proper care that I used to get.

Referring to the five dorms in H-Unit, Burrell added, Dorms 1 and 2 were for EOP, set with single bunks with 100 people in each dorm when I was there.

Burrell has been incarcerated about 3 1/2 years and is scheduled to reenter society sometime in August of next year.

Around mid-March, Burrell, along with several EOP prisoners, including John Chang, 39, were transferred from H-Unit to North Block.

They said they were moving me because they needed more space so that people could social distance, Burrell said.

North Block is an enclosed and unventilated housing unit with 414 cells stacked five tiers high. The cells are about 4-feet wide and 10-feet long, windowless, with a barred door in its front. The cells are smaller than the average parking space. Prison officials assign two people to each cell a significant factor that allowed coronavirus to thrive inside the prison.

Since the pandemic, prisoners have been locked inside their cells for more than 23 hours a day with the only exceptions the estimated

100 or so prisoners who work in the prisons furniture factory, kitchen or are hospital janitors. The remaining 700 or s prisoners are let out of their cells every other day (one tier at a time) for 90 minutes in order to shower in one of 10 racially segregated community showers, and/or go to the prison-yard, and/or make a 15-minute telephone call on one of 12 phones, if sign-up slots are available,

Program at North Block is worse than doing time in the SHU (pronounced shoe Secured Housing Unit), Chang said. Some days CDCR provides yard time, but for the most part we are confined to our tiny cells. Before Covid-19, EOP inmates lived in dorm settings with unlimited access to phones and showers. EOP was free to walk around the yard and dayroom.

Adding to Burrells stress, he said hes tested negative for Covid 19 since June 24. He gets tested at least once a week.

They never told me why Im tested so much, Burrell said. I think theyre trying to give it to me, or cover their ass. I believe theyre trying to give it to me because they put me in a cell with someone who had it.

Burrell applied for early release last March. The parole board responded that he doesnt currently fit the criteria for accelerated releaseinmates must be within 365 days of release to be considered for the program. In addition, you have been deemed ineligible due to your current term for domestic violence.

Burrell re-applied for release, writing to the parole board last November, I have been doing all the groups that I can to help myself as a person. I sit back everyday doing a self inventory on myself. I have learned multiple ways to channel my anger. I have learned that fighting is not the answer to every problem. I have learned being in the EOP program that talking to a person can eliminate the main part of the problem within myself and that is my pride.

Burrell awaits the parole boards response.

San Quentin began a recreational therapy program for EOP prisons. It runs about one and a half hours a day, but Burrell says the time conflicts with phone, yard and shower time.

I feel like Im not getting proper treatment. We used to be able to talk to our case workers every time we asked, Burrell said about the North Block EOP program. Compared to the H-Unit program. People want to talk to their clinicians or go to crisis beds, but theyre being ignored and pushed in the dark. Im having nightmares all the medication is doing is making me tired. Im uncomfortable in the cell because my cellie had Covid-19. I cant think or focus.

Burrell said living on North Block along with general population prisoners makes him uncomfortable. He said he wants to be moved to a safe atmosphere because of the stigma of having mental health problems in prison, and being mixed with general population.

There are good people in EOP, Burrell said. We just have mental issues that we have to deal with but cant because were not getting proper treatment.

Chang said that the EOP program taught him how to cope with his mental illness.

It teaches different ways to deal with stress and we learn about triggers, he said, adding being in the EOP program during the Covid-19 crisis is scary as he notes the impact of being transferred from a 100-man dorm to an 800-man building.

You cant social distance because of overcrowding, Chang said about North Block. Weve lost 10 hours per week of mental health treatment and were locked in a 4 x 10 cell more than 23 hours a day.

Chang, however, was constructive.I wear a mask at all times when I am in public, he said. I believe social distancing is important in preventing Covid-19.

At the time of this writing, Chang was scheduled to get out of prison January 27, 2021. He said he looks forward to seeing his three daughters.

*Banner photo: North Block at San Quentin, courtesy of the*San Quentin News.

Juan Moreno Haines is a journalist incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison and senior editor at the award-winning San Quentin News. A member of the Society of Professional Journalists, he was awarded its Silver Heart Award for being a voice for the voiceless. His work has appeared in The Guardian, The Appeal, Hastings Race and Poverty Law Journal, Above the Law, UCLA Law Review, Life of the Law, The Oakland Post, LA Progressive, and CalMatters, among others. In 2020, he received the PEN Prison Writing Contests Fielding A. Dawson Prize in Fiction.

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