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Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

Twice-Hourly Disruptions Amount to Torture, Advocates Say

by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | January 21, 2016

Since August 2015, men in the Pelican Bay State Prison Security Housing Unit have been subjected to loud, disruptive welfare checks, causing sleep deprivation that amounts to torture, according to [prisoners rights activists](#).

The welfare checks, which occur throughout the state prison system, were only recently implemented in the Pelican Bay SHU, which still houses approximately 900 men in solitary confinement despite the [recent settlement](#) to reduce isolation in Californias prisons. The checks were originally ordered by the courts in 2006 to reduce suicides in Administrative Segregation Units, which serve as short-term solitary confinement units, but the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation has since expanded them to all segregation units, including the SHU, Psychiatric Services Unit, short- and long-term restricted housing units and death row.

Security welfare checks were implemented at the Pelican Bay State Prison SHU on August 3, 2015, to further CDCRs efforts to reduce suicides, CDCR spokesperson Terry Thornton told Solitary Watch. Soon after the policys implementation in the Pelican Bay SHU, complaints began to emerge about the noise of the checks, which are meant to occur twice an hour in staggered increments to ensure individuals held in the isolation units dont know precisely when they will happen.

According to several reports, the checks are particularly disruptive at night, as they disrupt the sleep of those in the SHU, causing sleep deprivation and a litany of related health effects.

According to one account from a man held in the Pelican Bay SHU, provided by Peoples Action for Rights and Community: So the thing with this new system is that its really more of another form of torture and adding sleep deprivation to our already torturous conditions by constantly banging on our cell doors, shining of flashlights in our face, and loud beeping noises that can be heard going off on each door all day and night, and waking us up each time. So we really havent had a good nights sleep since it started and are all walking around like zombies from lack of sleep.

In November, the Jail and Prison Health Committee of the American Public Health Association issued an [open letter](#) expressing their concern over the checks, saying the impact of these checks is further damaging to the mental health of persons who are already denied both direct human contact and exposure to nature. The committee recommended an end to the checks until they can be done less intrusively, and suggested prison officials consult with mental health professionals to develop solutions going forward.

Legal action has brought about some improvement in the past few weeks. CDCR officials are aware of and are being responsive to the complaints of noise and sleep deprivation, said Thornton. CDCR has been studying the causes of the noise and possible solutions to reduce the amount of noise in the SHU.

Under the terms of an [agreement](#) between prison officials and attorneys representing those in the SHU, dated December 28, 2015, the checks will be reduced to once an hour between 10:00 pm and 6:00 am in the Pelican Bay SHU, while [prison officials] work to assess and possibly reduce the noise caused by the opening and closing of the Units pod doors. Under the terms of the order, CDCR must report to the plaintiffs and the court-appointed Special Master on the status of any changes.

The parties shall thereafter confer with the Special Master regarding this matter, and if necessary conduct a site visit to the Pelican Bay SHU to assess any changes relating to pod-door noise, the order reads. This Stipulation will expire on May 1, 2015, but may be continued by further Stipulation and concurrence of the Special Master.

The Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity coalition argues that even if their frequency is reduced, the checks still do more harm than good. Our stance is that the checks need to stop in PB SHU, the coalition told Solitary Watch via email. They are causing sleep deprivation, and sleep deprivation is torture. These checks serve no welfare or security purpose; they only harm the prisoners, mentally and physically.

From the coalitions perspective, the better thing for CDCR to do is to provide meaningful mental health and medical care instead of

relying on the checks to achieve the goal of suicide prevention. Certainly best practice does not include denying mental and physical healthcare (as is happening in PB) to people who are living in draconian conditions, then jarring them every 30-60 minutes to see if it has led them to suicide yet, the coalition said.

Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watch's first and most prolific intern. Based in Los Angeles, he served as an editorial writer and columnist for the Orange County Register and the Press-Enterprise, and is now the opinion editor for the Southern California News Group.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

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These checks are commonly done in most isolation units or lockdowns they are not a form of torture and they actually save lives one can't have their cake and eat it too sure there are some officers who are loud but the majority just want to do their rounds, make sure everyone is breathing living flesh and get out of the pod so twice an hour is a necessity to preserve lives in such units. Sooner or later, the inmate gets accustomed to these rounds and adjust some just like to whine but the majority appreciate the fact, someone is actually looking after their safety whether noisy or not, they remain alive or at the very least the prevention of an attempt may save a life it's the nature of the beast inside there.

The annoying metallic sound of rustling keys on a guard's hip as he walked past my cell and the harsh clanking noise of those heavy steel doors internal locking mechanisms being unlocked opened and slammed shut is not something that I ever got used to or slept soundly through. Did I ever complain? No, it was part of doing time. But some guards were more stealth than others who at times seemed to be trying to disturb us. Thankfully I never spent more than a couple of weeks in the hole and never been to PB.

I also hate sleeping in a hospital as the nurses constantly interrupt your sleep as well. Sleep deprivation is indeed a form of torture. Maybe you were considerate making your rounds but you might have overheard some other guards joking about annoying the animals.

In the end all a suicidal inmate would need to do is jump up after they passed him by and commit the act after all he'd have 30 minutes to accomplish the task before they made the next round.

Life is different on the other side of those doors.

USA, its inhumane, result of the addiction to fear that the USA's excess cult of individuality breeds

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