

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/05/21/deaf-prisoners-in-florida-face-brutality-and-solitary-confinement/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | May 21, 2013

In the a Florida prison called the Reception and Medical Center, a corrections officer appears at a cell door and begins mocking fake sign language to the man inside, who is deaf. Then he pulls Sam Hart out of the cell and escorts him for a haircut. After half his hair is shaved off one side of his head, the guard orders the haircutter to stop.

As Hart describes in a letter, the officer then says, Look, not only is he deaf but now he even looks dumb.

Hart, who was born hearing and can speak and read lips, replies, Don't play with me, I do not play with you and I do not disrespect you.

Fuck you, says the officer. Mother fucker. The next day the same officer stops by Hart's cell. Did you get to show it to the warden, dummy? he asks.

The abuse experienced by deaf prisoners housed in the Florida Department of Corrections defies imagination. Talila Lewis, founder and president of HEARD (Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of the Deaf), a group that supports deaf prisoners, wrote in the [op-ed pages of the Sun Sentinel](#), the south Florida newspaper. She continued:

The Florida Department of Corrections (DOC) has systematically created a culture of fear and hopelessness for disabled prisoners. The DOC's failure to provide adequate accommodations for and protections to this vulnerable population is beyond reproach. Countless deaf prisoners, their family members, and advocates have expressed concern for the safety and well-being of these prisoners in Florida's state prison facilities. Many of Florida's deaf prisoners, fearful of brutal retaliation and assured of prison officials' apathy or complicity, have all but given up hope of ever living safe from fear of sexual and physical assault.

Lewis said her information is based on 21 deaf prisoners out of a total of 40 in Florida, held in six different prisons across the state. Overall, Lewis writes, HEARD's Deaf and Deaf-Blind Prisoner Database includes information on more than 400 men and women, in 38 states, the District of Columbia, and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The abuse and violations occurring in Florida are, by far, the worst that we have seen.

Lewis said she has sent letters to the Governor Rick Scott, Department of Corrections head Michael D. Crews, and state prison inspector general Jeff Beasley. So far she has received no replies. She also wrote to and met with officials in the Justice Department's disability rights section, and received no response from there, either. Inquiries by Solitary Watch to Ann Howard, press spokesperson for the Florida Department of Corrections, so far have not been answered.

This past year, one deaf prisoner [later revealed to be Sam Hart] risked his life to report to the Office of the Inspector General horrendous physical and sexual abuse of other prisoners with disabilities as well as other serious violations occurring at the prison [Tomoka Correctional Facility], Lewis wrote in her op-ed. She continued:

Though this prisoner's complaint resulted in at least two officers being fired and numerous prisoners being transferred out of the facility, the Office of the Inspector General informed staff at Tomoka that this prisoner was responsible for lodging this anonymous complaint. As a result of this breach of confidentiality, this prisoner's life has been threatened by staff and prisoners at Tomoka. Just last week, despite numerous requests from advocates not to send him back to this facility, the Florida Department of Corrections sent this prisoner back to what can only be described as a living hell for this man who sacrificed his own safety to protect others. As of the writing of this letter, he has not been heard from by any of those community members with whom he consistently maintains contact.

Lewis told Solitary Watch she fears Hart will be killed just as soon as he is released from solitary in late May.

In their letters to the governor and other officials, HEARD documented conditions and events at Tomoka over the past year, based on the diary-style reports provided by deaf men held there. Some excerpts from these reports appear below:

This place is infested with the mice and rats that I told you about before. In fact it's more infested with mice and rats since the last time I told you about it. They have had time to breed. It's so full of mice and rats that you have to stay awake when the lights go out or they will

actually crawl up on the bunk with you. They [the cells] have foot lockers bolted to the walls that set higher than the bottom bunk that almost level with the top bunk that these mice and rats will climb up on, run along the foot lockers and jump off in the bunk where you are laying

Deaf prisoners filing grievances were beaten by other prisoners, threatened with and put into solitary for 60-90 days

A man was stabbed in the head and chest because he was thought to be a snitch

Deaf [man] got robbed of his wedding ring and a chain

.One deaf-blind prisoner was robbed again by two men and another extortion attempt by a prisoner

.The man assigned to help the blind inmate has been stealing this blind man's money and stamps when they come in

Lewis summarizes: One deaf-blind prisoner at TCI has the intellectual capacity of a young child. He is constantly subjected to sexual assault. Multiple elderly (70+ years old) wheelchair users are housed here and are beaten by their impaired assistants. These impaired assistants regularly withhold food and refuse to take blind or wheelchair bound prisoners to the bathroom or shower if these individuals do not perform sexual acts for or with these and other persons. They have been known to spend days in their own feces and urine, afraid or unable to leave their cells. Two of our deaf prisoners attempted to help the blind guys when they could by helping them get showers from time to time. These prisoners (blind and wheelchair users) are beaten (bones have been shattered and heads split open) when they complained to guards.

Lewis says that on September 19, 2012, HEARD wrote to Ken Tucker, then secretary of the Florida Department of Corrections, informing him of the abuse of deaf, elderly, and disabled prisoners under his care. A little more than a week after we sent the letter to Secretary Tucker, a guard threw the only TTY [special telephone for the deaf] in the facility to the ground and shouted, Now try to call someone! Around the same time, the deaf man who wrote the most detailed of the letters was sent to another camp, and many of the deaf men who were in a unit together at Tomoka were split up, with the most severely disabled prisoner a deaf-blind prisoner with diagnosed mental retardation who was taken care of by other deaf at Tomoka being placed alone in the worse dorm on the compound.

On October 18, 2012, HEARD also received a message from another man in Tomoka stating similar facts that [name omitted] was raped and all of his things stolen. Please help.

Around Christmas, Felix Garcia, a deaf man held at Tomoka, described another deaf prisoner being put in solitary confinement because a cell phone was found in his locker. According to Lewis, He says that a gang member in the dorm that planted this phone, and these cell phones are coming in by the guards. It's common knowledge that guards will charge inmates \$20 for 5 minutes use on a cell phone.

On January 5, 2013, deaf prisoner Robert was reportedly locked up for a cell phone planted in his locker. When cell phones are found in the facility, not only are prisoners removed from the dorm and subjected to 30 days in solitary, but their visiting privileges are banned for the rest of their sentences. It seems that there is no investigation when these cell phones are found, despite the fact that these men are deaf, cannot communicate on such a phone, and are unable to text due to illiteracy.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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.

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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I think all the officers of City, State, Federal and international to be educated about Deaf and Blind. The Bible once said Do not curse the Deaf and point the Blind. for those hearing officers or the inmates who did over the Deaf and Blind into a terrible manner or whatever

they did to them, will be HELD ACCOUNTABLE!

Please hold them accountable here on earth, and not when they died!

If the content of the article/posting is substantiated (and I have no reason to doubt it!) I think there is a huge problem. for the ones committing the abuse and the ones looking away when they are informed of the abuse!

These activities are clearly acts of torture, dehumanization, mental and physical abuse, and MUST be punished!

And no, then I do not mean being punished by a slap on the wrist, or an administrative note!

The people committing these activities on and with prisoners must be prosecuted to the full extend of the law, and be punished in the most severe way and manner!

The prisoners have been put in their care, and thus the ones committing these crimes are fully and totally responsible for their actions! And not only the ones actually factually committing these crimes of torture (see national and international definitions of and on torture), but also, and even more so the ones who have been informed and have failed to stop the torture!

Authorities are responsible, accountable and punishable for what the people under and in their supervision are doing, and for that responsibility and accountability these authorities must stand, being forced to stand, and when they fail they MUST be held accountable!

And when not on a state, federal, or national level, then on an international level!

What is described is totally unacceptable!

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