

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | October 30, 2015

In 2008, the federal Bureau of Prisons passed a [policy prohibiting the use of restraints](#) on women in custody who are in labor, delivery or postpartum recovery. In 2009, Texas passed a law banning the use of shackles on incarcerated pregnant women during labor, delivery and postpartum recovery. But, as both the [ACLU of Texas](#) and the [Texas Jail Project](#) have found, for women in the states jails, the law has not always been put into practice.

Shannon Richardson, who wrote the piece below, was 22 weeks pregnant when she entered the Texas jail system. Richardson had been arrested on federal charges, but was held at the county jail while awaiting trial. Under the agreement between the U.S. Marshal Services (USMS) and the Gregg County Sheriffs Office, the USMS pays the jail a fixed per diem rate of \$43 for the housing, safekeeping, and subsistence of federal prisoners, including guard/transportation services to medical facility. Under the agreement, the county agrees to provide for the secure custody, care and safekeeping of federal prisoners in accordance with federal, state, and local law. The county also agrees to provide the federal prisoners with the same level of health care and services inside the facility that are provided to local prisoners.

But the level of health care provided to local prisoners leaves much to be desired. In 2012, Nicole Guerreros [complaints of pain and bleeding were ignored](#) by a jail nurse; her baby died shortly after being born in a holding cell. In 2014, [Shela Williams](#) waited two weeks for prenatal care despite telling jail staff that hers was a high-risk pregnancy. Weeks later, her fetus died in utero. Her labor was induced; despite the law, she was restrained. She requested a furlough to attend her babys funeral; instead, she was placed in lockdown.

Starting September 1, 2015, a new law now requires Texass 247 jails to [record and report detailed information about its policies and practices](#). Each jail will be required to report how it treats pregnant women in custody, including health care, mental health care, drug treatment, nutritional standards, housing and the use of solitary confinement. While the 2009 law required jails to report the number of pregnancies each month, the new one also requires each jail to report the number of miscarriages. Victoria Law

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What is solitary confinement? In a word, it is *hell*. It is a place overly used by jail and prison officials when they dont know what to do with someone. You want to kill yourself? Youre going to seg. You even get your own turtle suit. If you werent serious about killing yourself before, after some time in seg, you will be coming up with ways to do it. Have a medical emergency? Youre going to seg for observation. Have a mental problem? Forget getting the help you needyoure going to seg. Cant behave or get along with others? Youre going to seg. Thatll teach you

I was arrested on June 7, 2013. I was 20 weeks pregnant. I was placed in general population in Titus County (Texas) where I never had a strike against me. On June 12, 2013, I was taken to the hospital for contractions. I have a history of premature deliveries, but thankfully I received medical attention in time and this was avoided.

On June 21, 2013, I was transferred to Gregg County (Texas). By the time I got there, I was in pain and spotting. I informed the person at intake that I was a high-risk pregnancy, had just been in the hospital and was now bleeding and in pain. I was placed in a holding cell with detox on the door. The cell had vomit on the toilet, sink, floor and wall. There was also feces and urine surrounding the toilet, sink and wall. I was instructed to sit on the floor. When I asked the guard for water, I was told there was a sink in the cell. With tears in my eyes and my stomach churning from the sight of human waste surrounding me, I told the guard it wasnt sanitary. The guard simply shrugged and walked away.

A few hours later, a guard forced me to carry my mat and all issued property on my own, despite my complaint of bleeding and pain. She said I should drag it because she wasnt carrying my shit for me.

I was then placed in a segregation cell. The cell was contaminated with blood, urine and feces. Open piles of trash surrounded me. When I again asked for water, I was once again told I had a sink in my cell. The guard instructed me to use the sink and toilet combothe one that was covered in human waste. Anyone in their right mind would understand this was a hazard to my baby and me.

Once I was in my cell, I was given pads for my bleeding while the guards spoke publicly about my case and laughed at me. They taunted my crying and nicknamed me Star Diva.

The next day, I was given a TB test. A nurse instructed me to place my arm through the food hole in the door not the most sanitary way of doing things, but considering the fact that I was surrounded by human waste and trash, it didn't seem like a big deal at the time. I knelt down to the hole in the door, pouring my heart out and begging the nurse for help. The nurse told me to fill out a form, and closed the slot in my face.

I filled out forms requesting medical care and attention, still complaining to each and every guard about my increasing bleeding and pain. I even showed them my bloody pads for proof of my bleeding. I continued to be laughed at and more pads were literally thrown through the slot in the door.

My time in segregation was extremely stressful and unnecessary. To the left of me was a woman coming off of drugs. I know this because the guards were also laughing at and making fun of her. She was delusional and would scream and bang on walls and the door literally all day and night. To the right of me was a woman who was labeled suicidal. She screamed and cried all day and night as well. In addition to my noisy neighbors, there was *constant* screaming in the vents. This is the way people communicate in seg.

After six days of complaining about bleeding, hurting and a fever, my water broke. It took several hours to be moved to the hospital. I was told I had an infection (not surprising considering my living conditions) that caused my water to break, which could have easily been treated had I received medical care when I first reported the bleeding and pain.

I lay chained and shackled to a hospital bed with two guards staring at me day and night for a week. My infection continued to get worse and they were having a hard time keeping my contractions away. At the end of the week, my baby's heart rate started going down dangerously low each time I had a contraction. At one point, my contractions were so bad, I could barely breathe through the pain. Apparently, I was holding my breath through one (not on purpose, but anyone who has had a baby, or who has had a sudden burst of pain knows that it knocks the breath right out of you hence the need for Lamaze classes!). I suddenly had a nurse and a guard in my face *screaming* at me! They said I was pushing because my face was red! I tried to explain that I simply hurt and it was hard to breathe, but I was crying too hard at that point. I was all alone and feeling afraid, hopeless, and I was terrified my baby was going to die. Not to mention the fact that I was handcuffed and shackled to a bed, and now I had people in my face screaming at me. I wouldn't wish all of that on Satan himself. Words could not possibly do justice to the way I was feeling then.

My son was born via c-section on July 4, 2013. I woke up chained and shackled to a bed without my baby. No one would tell me if he was even alive until later that night. They let me go several hours believing my baby had died. The next day, I was visited by a U.S. marshal who assured me I would see my son before I left the hospital.

On July 8th, the same marshal and a Gregg County guard took me from the hospital without allowing me to see my baby. I was crying uncontrollably. The marshal screamed at me for crying.

I was then placed in a small metal cage that only took up half of the back of a van; it was a dog kennel for humans, only smaller. I am five foot, nine inches tall, so I had to sit with my knees twisted to the side and with my back hunched over. I was forced to ride this way for over three hours without a break after having my stomach cut open only four days before.

When I arrived at the next institution [Federal Medical Center at Carswell], I was in so much pain, I couldn't think straight. I saw a doctor who told me that because of the way I had been positioned for so long, blood clots had formed in my c-section. A large needle had to be placed in my incision to drain the blood clot.

On August 13, 2013, I was transferred back to the Gregg County Jail. Within a couple of days, I began to run a fever, have chills, was vomiting, and had a horrible headache. I began submitting medical requests, which were once again ignored. On August 17, 2013, a nurse came in to check on another inmate's blood pressure. The women around me told her I needed to be seen. She took my temperature; it was almost 104 degrees the first time and higher the next. At this point, I was in and out of consciousness. I was taken to the hospital where I was admitted. It was determined I had a bad infection again.

When I was released from the hospital, my transporting guards (one of which was a lieutenant) said, We need to get this bitch out of here. She could have two lawsuits on us by now. Their bedside manner was clearly lacking.

I was transferred to Smith County (Texas) the next day. I was taken straight to segregation. A guard told me it was because Gregg County warned them that they would end up with a lawsuit if they didn't watch me. It wasn't like I gave myself infections, or even could, but I was being blamed anyway.

Segregation in Smith County was similar to Gregg County. I wasn't surrounded by human waste and trash, but I did have a little mouse family who lived in the big hole under my shower. Have you ever seen *The Green Mile*? I tried to convince myself that the critters under my shower were super cool like the mouse in the movie. I failed miserably every time they came out to visit. I ended up standing on my bed or desk screaming. Apparently, the jail had an infestation problem. They had the nice human tape traps everywhere then some sadistic officers would stomp them and all you could hear was CRUNCH. The sound made me literally vomit a couple of times.

Again, my neighbors were less than ideal. To the left, there was MSB. The poor woman was delusional and had to face her demons all day (and night!). She relived things in her past and would scream and curse until she couldn't walk until a couple of hours later when she was recharged and ready to go again. While I wanted to scream and cry after listening to her day and night (I admit I gave in to that urge more than once), my heart also went out to her. I tried talking to her, but most of the time, she wouldn't acknowledge me. The guards loved messing with her. They would talk on her speaker in her cell, making fun of her. On several occasions, they would say, This is Pizza Hut (apparently her favorite restaurant the lady has good taste!). Place your order please. She would place her order and then scream at the delivery guy for hours because he didn't show up. But the worst was when they would throw a dead mouse into her slot in her door. They laughed as she screamed and cried with everything she had in her. They would leave it for several hours.

To the right of me, I had a lifeline for a couple of days. I couldn't see her face, but we became friends. It's amazing how quickly you come to rely on and need a person in such a desperate situation. She was there on suicide watch for swallowing a blade. She said she was rocking a turtle suit! We laughed together. We cried together. We sang together. We talked for hours. Then, she was gone. I cried. I missed my friend.

Her cell wasn't empty long. They moved an elderly lady in there. She was unable to hold her bladder or bowels, so that earned her a trip to seg! She would have an accident, push the button, and wait. One day she sat around naked *all day* before a guard opened the door. She was gagging and started screaming at the lady. Another time, she had an accident, but didn't have clothes or even a towel, so she yelled for me to call someone. I pushed the button and told them she was in the shower and didn't have a towel or a change of clothes. I pushed the button over and over for several hours to get help for her as she sat cold and naked in the shower crying. Segregation should *not* be used as a nursing home!

Add to this the constant yelling in the vents and banging on doors. It was enough to make the sanest person go insane! The next time I was taken to court, I asked the Marshals why I was once again placed in segregation. They were honestly surprised that I was in seg (or they deserve an Emmy for their performance). They told Smith County to place me in general population, but they refused. I was once again moved.

I have filed a lawsuit against two U.S. Marshals and various staff members of the Gregg County Jail. It is my hope that, with this lawsuit and publicity, we can take a step toward preventing this type of abuse in the future. My fear is that without bringing public awareness, this will all continue to be hidden and nothing will change. I'm doing this for my son, for every single inmate, for their families, and for those who didn't survive the neglect and abuse of jails and prisons. If I win this case, it will create a precedent that will mandate not only the medical treatment of inmates, but it will also limit the use of solitary confinement and mandate livable conditions for all prisoners.

Shannon Guess Richardson, #21213-078, FCI Aliceville, PO Box 4000, Aliceville, AL 35442

Note: In December 2013, Richardson was sentenced to 18 years in federal prison. She filed suit in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Texas in March 2015.

In response to Richardson's suit, both U.S. Marshals stated that they are not involved in and do not exercise control over or supervise the day-to-day decisions regarding a federal detainee's confinement while housed at a contract jail such as Gregg County Jail. They also stated that the U.S. Marshals do not have control over the particular cell that Ms. Richardson was detained in while at Gregg County Jail, similarly had no control over the cleanliness or sanitation over the cell that Gregg County housed Ms. Richardson in, and are not involved in the day-to-day decisions regarding a Federal Prisoner's medical care while housed in a contract jail.

On September 25, 2015, the federal court agreed with the Marshals and dismissed Richardson's suit against them. V.L.

This article originally appeared on [CounterPunch](#).

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

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