

Equal Justice Initiative

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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11.08.17

William Widmer

Last week, the Equal Justice Initiative reached a final settlement with the Alabama Department of Corrections resolving our complaints about conditions at St. Clair Correctional Facility in Springville, Alabama.

ADOC has agreed to make substantial changes, repairs and reforms that we believe will dramatically reduce the level of violence that exists and ameliorate the deplorable conditions at St. Clair, said EJI Director Bryan Stevenson. We are pleased that Commissioner Dunn has made a strong commitment and appointed key administrators to move the reforms forward quickly.

EJI filed a class action lawsuit in 2014 on behalf of men incarcerated at St. Clair, following the failure of the Alabama Department of Corrections to respond to dangerous conditions and an extraordinarily high rate of violence at St. Clair, including six homicides in the preceding 36 months.

The agreement provides for the implementation of two vital new systems that are critical to effective prison management and have been used effectively in prison systems across the country for years.

The corrections department has agreed to implement an internal classification system that will protect incarcerated people and prison staff by ensuring that individual's risks and needs are taken into account when assigning them to housing and programs, rather than the current practice of randomly assigning people to the first open bed without identifying conflicts or other potential problems. It will be the first such system in any facility in Alabama, and the department will work with prison classification expert James Austin to design the system. Dr. Austin is nationally recognized for implementing internal classification systems across the country that substantially reduce violence in prisons.

An incident management system will also be created to help prison officials prevent, track, and respond to violent incidents. The system will be designed by Ken McGinnis, former chief administrative officer of two of the nation's largest and most complex correctional systems, Illinois and Michigan, and one of the most highly regarded corrections experts in the country. The Inspector General will oversee the prison's incident management and all violent incidents will be independently investigated to increase accountability.

The agreement also provides for significant structural reforms. EJI documented serious and chronic lapses in security, including broken and non-functioning locks on the majority of cell doors. Under the agreement, all cell door locks will be replaced, video cameras for monitoring will be installed, several new housing units will be designated to protect incarcerated people with safety needs, and a transitional unit for inmates leaving segregation will be created. The National Institute of Corrections will help analyze issues relating to staff recruitment and retention.

It's a huge victory for the men and their families who deserve more security than they have seen, Stevenson said. It's exciting that rather than merely hoping the state makes improvements over the next several years while we continue to litigate, we can actually advance remedies immediately.

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