

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/02/11/women-prisoners-in-virginia-segregated-for-being-mentally-ill-or-looking-butch/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | February 11, 2010

A recent [article in the Charlottesville, Virginia, weekly C-Ville](#) exposes conditions at the nearby Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women. The report is based in part on statements from representatives of the Virginia Institutionalized Persons Project of the [Legal Aid Justice Center](#). Project director Helen Trainor and long-time volunteer Cynthia Neff have talked to inmates and read hundreds of letters complaining about conditions at the Fluvanna, which began to resemble the conditions at Virginia's strictest prisons, as opposed to a Class 3 prison that it is, Trainor told *C-Ville*.

The letters described discrimination and segregation. We were hearing from a number of people that they were discriminated against because they looked butch, aggressive-looking women, [Neff] says. In fact, the Associated Press reported in June that gay inmates were segregated, with lesbian inmates with short hair and baggy clothes kept apart in the butch-wing.

Trainor says that things began to change about a year ago when Michael Frame became the new major, or head of security, at Fluvanna. The previous major was convicted for having sex with female inmates, says Trainor. Neff says Frame proceeded to toughen the place up.

According to Trainor, women were forced to walk in single file to prevent inmates from talking to each other. Touching other inmates was also prohibited.

Trainor, who for matters of privacy can't identify inmates or quote directly from the letters, has paraphrased their content. In one instance, an inmate questions whether the new no-touching rule is conducive to her rehabilitation. Where does this rule come from? I tried to find them in the IOPs (internal operating procedures) but I couldn't.

In another, a woman writes that a mentally ill inmate was kept in solitary confinement for months. When it's time for her to take her shower, she is lead, shackled and naked, down the hall, with a dog leash attached to her shackles, by a male guard.

The [AP story](#) about the prisons butch wing is worth reading in full. The practice of segregating inmates based on appearance, which has in the past been ruled unconstitutional, was reportedly discontinued shortly after the AP story came out.

Other complaints against the prison, according to [another AP report](#) from November, include denying the women access to reading materials and religious services, withholding food as punishment, and placing inmates on a waiting list to use the restroom at night, early morning or during long lockdowns because their cells do not have toilets. Many say the wait can be up to an hour or longer, and that if an inmate relieves herself in her cell she is sent to segregation.

A local state senator asked the Virginia Department of Corrections to launch an investigation, the results of which are still pending. But in December, Fluvanna's Warden Barbara Wheeler, who had called the butch wing a figment of the inmates' imagination, [announced that she would retire](#) apparently, somewhat earlier than expected.

Thanks to Dan Moshenberg, whose emails and posts on the blog [Women in and Beyond the Global](#) have alerted us to several important stories, including this one.

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

What the hell is wrong with America. This is how they treat women in prison. It makes me sick to my stomach.

In light of the recently reported sexual abuse of women prisoners in Kentucky's Otter Creek prison for women the most disturbing thing I read above is the male guard escorting a nude woman to her shower and with a leash leaves a vision in my mind as disturbing as the Iraq photos. I guess it shouldn't surprise me after all the guard in Iraq learned his trade over here didn't he?

To be fair I hope the logic of the isolation of these tough looking women was to prevent the weaker ones from being forced into sexual relations with them. The flip side of this is the isolation of male transsexuals from the general population ostensibly for their own protection.

Something however needs to be done to protect the inmates from forced or coerced sexual relations (rape) from guards or other inmates.

But for the other abuses maybe Warden Barbara Wheeler should end up on the B-tch wing of her retirement home.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News