Free yourself  
By Terah Lawyer

In this issue, we focus on bullying. For more testimonies, see page 6.

Hit it, pushing, punching, grabbing, kicking, spitting, demeaning, calling names, saying nasty things, spreading rumors, excluding, snickering, whispering, glaring—these and many other behaviors are all tucked away under the term Bullying.

We can turn on the TV, listen to the radio, read a magazine, talk to a friend and the topic of bullying will show its ugly head. Bullying has affected our schools, our homes, the workplace, our society and our psychological barriers. It’s only natural to deduce that bullying has flourished in the largest women’s prison in the nation. A subculture develops even as our diversity increases. Our doors opened and women from VSPW walked in.

The old timers are standing their ground as the new arrivals are trying to find their footing. Personality types mingle and clash, and a platform is made for a psychological tug of war. Bullying then begins, gets exposure, is mimicked and spreads like wildflowers. Women are forced by others to leave their rooms during the day, talked about poorly, stereotyped, excluded and bullied. A victim of bullying has no face, no name, no particular DNA. If we are not being victimized or actually causing the bullying, we’re watching it happen and we’re keeping our eyes to ourselves and our mouths shut. We walk away and leave a potential victim in their distress.

It’s time we build up the courage to act upon what we feel is wrong when we feel it. At the risk of offending an egotistical, aggressive bully, we can begin to bring light to a dark place. With awareness comes responsibility to take action. We have started a grassroots organization called the F.R.E.E. Project (Female Rehabilitation and Enhanced Education). The proposal is currently on the Warden’s desk waiting for approval. The FREE Project focuses on enhancing the stages of change in someone’s life by involving them in bully-awareness workshops, peer pressure prevention, speak-up programs, and campaigns that hold everyone accountable for their behaviors. It’s about time we “be the change that makes a difference.” Get involved!

Bully Advocates:
Terah Lawyer (Sage), Lavee Dejohnette (Troubs), Sara Kruzan, Larisa Schuster, Rachel Mullenix, Loraine Serrano
Proposition 36 provides an opportunity for the resentencing of many people who are currently serving a life sentence as a result of a nonviolent, non-serious 3rd strike.

Not all people who are currently inside for a nonviolent, non-serious 3rd strike will qualify for resentencing under Prop 36. Some offenses on your criminal record may make you ineligible for resentencing, including certain sex offenses and drug- or gun-related felonies.

In order to be resentenced to a shorter term, you must file a petition – or have an attorney file a petition on your behalf – in the county where you were sentenced to your current term. This petition must be filed within two years of Prop 36’s effective date, unless good cause is shown. (By Prop 36’s own language, it became effective “on the first day after enactment by the voters,” which was November 7, 2012.)

If you believe you are eligible for resentencing under Prop 36, we strongly encourage you to reach out to your defense attorney and/or the Office of the Public Defender in the county where you were sentenced to your current term. If you need help finding contact information for your defense attorney and/or the Office of the Public Defender, you may contact Justice Now at the address below.

Some Public Defenders already have sent questionnaires to people inside who may be eligible for resentencing under Prop 36. If you have not received one of these questionnaires and you believe Prop 36 may apply to your case, we suggest that you ask a person inside for a blank copy of their questionnaire so that you can complete the form and send it to your defense attorney and/or the Office of the Public Defender in the county where you were sentenced to your current term.

For more information contact Justice Now, 1322 Webster St., Suite 210, Oakland, CA 94612.

En este artículo la letra “x” es utilizada para reflejar diversidad en la identidad de género; por ejemplo: “x estudiantes” es equivalente a escribir “las niñas y los niños”

La Propuesta 36 provee una oportunidad para la re-condenación de mucha gente que actualmente se encuentra en cadena perpetua como resultado de una 3ª falta por causa de un acto no-violento y de poca gravedad.

No todas las personas que se encuentran dentro por una 3ª falta a causa de un acto no violento, califican para la re-condenación bajo la Propuesta 36 (Prop. 36). Alguna ofensas en su historial criminal, podrían hacerla no elegible para la recondena, incluyendo ciertas ofensas relacionadas con graves delitos sexuales y de drogas – o por arma de fuego.

Para poder ser re-condenoado por un periodo más corto, usted tiene que llenar una petición - o tener un abogadx que pueda llenarla a su nombre- en el condado donde se le condenó a la actual condena. Esta petición tiene que ser remitida dentro un periodo de dos años a partir de la fecha en que entre en efecto la Prop. 36, o por el contrario presentar una buena razón (Por el mismo lenguaje de la Prop. 36, se hizo efectiva “el primer día después de ser decretada por lxs votantes”, el cual es el día 7 de noviembre del 2012).

Si cree que es elegible para la re-condena bajo la Prop. 36, le recomendamos enfáticamente que se comunique con su abogadx defensor y/o la oficina del Defensor Público (Public Defender) en el condado donde fue sentenciadx a su condena actual. Si necesita apoyo para contactar a su abogadx de-fensor y/o la oficina del Defensor Público, puede contactar a Justice Now en la dirección que se provee.

Algunxs defensorxs públicos ya han comenzado a enviar formularios a la gente que se encuentra dentro y son elegibles para una re-condena bajo la Prop. 36. Si no ha recibido alguno de estos formularios y cree que la Prop. 36 puede aplicar a su propio caso, le sugerimos que le pida una copia en limpio a alguien dentro, para que usted pueda completar el formulario y lo envíe a su abogadx defensor y/o la oficina del Defensor Público donde usted fue condenadx a su condena actual.

Para mayor información contacte a Justice Now, 1322 Webster St., Suite 210, Oakland, CA 94612.
Rest in Freedom, Flozelle Muka Woodmore

Flozelle Muka Woodmore’s transition on February 21, 2013, was met with an outpouring of disbelief and grief among those who knew and loved her, from within prison walls where she spent twenty years and beyond the walls among her family, friends and many supporters. Only five and a half years before, in August 2007, Flozelle was finally released from CCWF after a long fight for freedom which saw her parole eligibility reversed five times by Governors Davis and Schwarzenegger. Her persistent effort to win parole despite these setbacks shined a spotlight on the cruel injustice that incarcerated survivors of abuse suffered at the hands of California’s criminal legal system, the Parole Board and successive governors of the state.

In 2004 The Fire Inside (#29) wrote about Flozelle when the Board’s decision to grant her parole was reversed by Governor Schwarzenegger. We wrote, “Frozelle Woodmore is a 36-year-old battered woman who shot her abusive boy-

friend in self-defense in 1986. She met him when she was 13 years old and pled guilty to shooting him when she was 18. Although she had no prior criminal history, Flozelle received a 15 years-to-life sentence and has been in prison ever since. Her release is supported by her batterer’s family…The Governor’s decision will be challenged in court, but we need the public to voice outrage.”

Frozelle’s release was finally won through a mass campaign coordinated by the tireless efforts of Free Battered Women, her family, friends, her lawyer Johanna Hoffman and countless other advocates. Once released, Flozelle began to work at A New Way of Life Reentry Project in Los Angeles. She received a Soros Justice fellowship in 2010 to support the Voices of Hope project that she founded to help families understand and navigate the parole process for their loved ones. In October 2010, she participated in a CCWP statewide gathering to strategize about winning parole release for incarcerated survivors and other life-term women and trans prisoners.

Deirdre Wilson, former CCWP program coordinator, said “When I heard that our sister-warrior Flozelle Woodmore was on life support due to a brain aneurism, I felt the weight in her head, the blows; years of abuse, both personal and systemic, of stress, of heart-ache, of toxic racism, arrogance and hard-heartedness that she faced and fought on behalf of herself, and so many others.” Deirdre and other CCWP members and friends traveled across the state to be present at Flozelle’s funeral.

Lynne Stewart Update

Incarcerated 73-year-old lawyer Lynne Stewart is fighting stage IV cancer that has metastasized, spreading to her lymph nodes, shoulder, bones and lungs. Stewart is serving a 10-year sentence at Carswell federal prison near Fort Worth, Texas for distributing a press release on behalf of her jailed Egyptian client. As a result of the worldwide campaign to grant Stewart compassionate release, medical authorities and the warden at Carswell have recommended release and her application is now with the Federal government. Activist and activist Dick Gregory went on hunger strike to support Stewart because she had “devoted her entire professional life to the poor, the oppressed and those targeted by the police and a vindictive State.”

To sign the petition for compassionate release go to: http://www.change.org/petitions/petition-to-free-lynnestewart-save-her-life-release-her-now-2

You can write Lynne at:
Lynne Stewart #53504-054
FMC Carswell
PO Box 27137
Ft. Worth, TX 76127
En este artículo la letra “x” es utilizada para reflejar diversidad en la identidad de género; por ejemplo: “lxs niñxs” es equivalente a escribir “las niñas y los niños”

“Lifer” es Calo en inglés para referirse a personas quienes cumplen cadena perpetua.

¿Qué es un “bully”? ¿Es cuando nuestros padres nos demuestran un amor duro? ¿Son lxs niñxs que en el parque arrebatan los columpios? Cualquiera que sea el significado verdadero de bully, es en sí un círculo vicioso que comienza en una edad temprana, continuando hasta la vida adulta.

Al tiempo que las mujeres entramos en prisión, el 99.9% de nosotras hemos sido víctimas de bullying emocional y físicamente. Dicen que la prisión es el estómago de la bestia y el fuego en donde nace la bestia del bully, todo comienza el primer minuto después de poner un pie en el R&R (por sus siglas en inglés de Receiving & Release) Después de ser alineadas como patos, despojadas de la ropa y dignidad, entre tóxicos y azotes, mientras se escucha el sonido de llaves y voces de hombres. El nombre de pila que te dieron tus padres es también despojado, ya que ahora se te ha asignado un número. Este es el comienzo del bullying del CDCR que se va acumulando durante el tiempo que estamos en prisión, aumentando así nuestra pobre valoración personal y nuestra quebrantada autoestima.

Somos hospedadas en un cuarto con otras siete mujeres quienes vienen de todos los caminos de la vida. Algumas tienen enfermedades mentales y físicas, y su forma de lidiar con las preguntas que surgen en sus mentes, es hacerse una bully. Algunas de esas bully no te permiten utilizar sus lavaderos, baños o regaderas. ¿En ese caso vas a la “cop shop” y solicitas otro cuarto? ¿Temes que haya represalias de tu compañera de cuarto? ¿O continuas NUESTRA MENTE, CUERPO Y ALMA le pertenecen solo a nosotras y no al estómago de la bestia o O AL BULLY viviendo con el bullying? Esto nos afecta a todas de alguna u otra forma. Algumas viven en miedo constante a lo que sigue, intentando ser la mejor compañera de cuarto; pero ¿es esta la solución? El bullying lleva a una ansiedad constante, lo cual hace que muchas mujeres no sean capaces de recorrer el tan necesario proceso de cambio.

La gente que es empleada para servir y proteger, usan un broche que dice “Lxs más rudxs golpean en la calle”, pero cuando deciden permitir que la mujer más fuerte sea bully con las más débiles, ¿es a eso a lo que se refieren cuando dicen que las más rudas golpean en la calle? ¿O es esto bullying? Cuando un oficial quiere que una mujer o un grupo de mujeres dejen el mal comportamiento o que se comporten en cierta forma, buscan a la mujer más fuerte y/o “lifers” para hacerse cargo de la situación y reclaman que es su deber mantener el orden en la prisión. Entonces, ¿cuando es que la más ruda golpea en la calle termina y cuando comienza el bullying?

¿Es acaso cuando una persona transgénica es colocada en situaciones peligrosas porque el oficial está en desacuerdo con su identidad? Hay Derechos en la Constitución del condado que protegen la libertad religiosa y auto-expresión, pero dentro del estómago de la bestia pareciera que no existen.

¿Cuándo puede una mujer levantarse y salir de las sombras del bully? Cuando pueden las mujeres tratarse con respeto? El bullying es el núcleo para mantener a las mujeres controladas y alejadas de su propia identidad. Si nosotras, como mujeres y gente transgénera nos alzamos por lo que creemos y comenzamos un proceso de sanación, nuestro futuro es fuerte. No maás prisiones al dededor de nuestros corazones, sueños y nuestro futuro. Nuestra mente, cuerpo y alma le pertenecen solo a nosotras y no al estómago de la bestia o al bully.

Traducido por Alma Muñoz
What is a bully? Is it our parents giving us tough love? Is it the kids on the playground taking the swing? Whatever the true meaning of a bully it is a vicious cycle and it starts at an early age, continuing into adulthood.

By the time women enter into prison 99.9% of us have been bullied emotionally and physically. They say that prison is the belly of the beast and the fire of the bullying beast starts the minute you walk into R&R (Receiving & Release). Being lined up like ducks, stripped of your clothes and your dignity, coughing and swatting while you hear keys dangling and male voices in the background. Your birth name that your parents gave you is also stripped away because you are given a number. This is the start of the CDCR bullying that keeps piling up the whole time we are in prison, adding to our poor self-worth and broken self-esteem.

We are housed in a room with seven other women who come from all walks of life. Some are mentally ill and physically ill, but their way to cope with the thoughts racing through their minds is to become a bully. Some of those bullies do not allow you to use their sink, restroom, or shower. Do you go to the “cop shop” and ask for a different room? Do you fear retaliation from your roommate? Or do you continue living with the bullying? It affects all of us in different ways. Some live in a constant fear of what’s next, trying to be the perfect roommate, but is this the answer? Bullying leads to constant anxiety, which stops women from being able to go through a much needed process of change.

The people who are employed to serve and protect wear a pin that reads “The toughest beat on the street”, but when they choose to allow the stronger women to bully the weaker ones is that the toughest beat on the street? Or is that bullying? When an officer wants a woman or a group of women to stop acting out or to act a certain way, they find the stronger women and/or the “lifers” to handle the situation claiming it is their duty to keep the prison in order. So, where does the toughest beat on the street stop and bullying start?

Is it when a transgender person is placed in harm’s way because an officer doesn’t agree with their identity? There are Amendments in the country’s Constitution to protect freedom of religion and self-expression, but inside the belly of the beast they don’t seem to apply.

When do women start to step up and step out of the shadows of the bully? When do women start treating each other with respect? Bullying is at the core of keeping women controlled and keeping them away from their self-identity. If we as women and transgender people stand up for what we believe in and begin a healing process, our future is powerful. No more prisons around our hearts, dreams, and our future. Our mind, body and soul belong to ourselves not the belly of the beast or a bully.
Bullying is a Revolving Door of Tears, Fears and Tragedies
By Anna Bell Chapa, CCWF

As I watch talk shows, the news, and read books, they talk about bullying all the time. Please do not exclude prisoners from this topic. We shouldn’t be forgotten!

We are being bullied by the circumstances, by our background, by what we have or don’t have, by our handicap needs, race, gender and even looks. Society bullies and judges us by the things we did in the past and not by who we are today. Prison staff bully us in many different ways. If you are one of the people that ignores, excuses, keeps quiet, or walks away, you are also a bully and you probably don’t even know it.

Remember, if you are being bullied and you think that suicide is the only way out, think twice. Suicide is not the answer – it gets way better.

The prize
By Geraldine Quinton, W65872, CIW, the hole

I wake each day,
My thoughts searching, searching for peace.
In the bed I lay,
Listening, listening for quarrels to cease.
Will this chaos ever stop?
My hope is returning home to my family and friends.
But my stomach is always in a knot.
This rage inside me rarely bends.
Oh! It may hide, sometimes behind a rib
or even the bones of my knees.
Plotting, plotting to commit suicide, but refrain – due to the fee.
Who wants to live with this anger, hostility and rage?
Yet have hope for a better place
It is I who live in this cage,
With my mind set on winning this race.

Geraldine Quinton, W65872
P. O. Box 8100 (SPHU – 226)
Corona, CA 92878 – 8100

Bullying
by Glenda D., CCWF

A bully once told me “oh, I’m gonna get my respect” and I replied, “No you won’t. You’ll get forced obedience, but a person’s respect is earned.” On this subject of bullying, I’m no novice; not because I bully, but because I have been bullied too often. I’ve noticed that bullying takes many forms, verbal as well as physical. A bully has many shapes. They aren’t always “big and mean.” They can also come across as harmless until riled. Church people as well as gang bangers can be bullies. Bullying comes from a desire to dominate, manipulate or control. Anytime you forcefully push your views, wants, or desires over someone else, you are being a bully. As a Christian, I’ve learned that Christ loved people into the right relationship with God. That shows me that we are to lead by example….not by force.
Transgender rights: Stop Harassment and Discrimination

By Sherri Masbruch, CIW

I am a 43 old male-to-female transgender currently incarcerated at the California Institution for Women (CIW)... My father began molesting me at the age of nine. I was afraid of my father and trying to talk to somebody about what was happening to me was absolutely out of the question. Therefore, I had no other choice than to suck it up and get over it – though it is fairly obvious that it’s just not that simple.

As a committed advocate for transgender equality, I feel obligated to point out that a federal district court held in Crosby v. Reynolds that the safety needs of a transgender inmate trump the privacy needs of other prisoners... All of the transgender males that are presently housed here have just as much right to be here as any of us. Do we ever think about how they are routinely ostracized and endlessly harassed and discriminated against?.... The transgender population in California prisons typically need more support – not less!.... The LGBT community is all too familiar with how people like to inflict their personal opinions and/or religious beliefs on to them. How much better would our world be if people could just get a life and let everyone else live theirs the way that they choose to.

It would also serve well to remember that we are all in the same boat together. To attack any member of this community of ours is very counter-productive as change will not come until we can learn how to stand as one.

Welcome Misty Rojo, CCWP’s new Co-Coordinate

CCWP is very excited to announce that Misty Rojo is CCWP’s new program co-coordinator! Misty brings a long history of organizing experience as a formerly incarcerated woman and a founding, still active member of Justice Now’s Board. Even while still living in North Carolina, Misty was an active organizer of the Jan. 26, 2013 Chowchilla Freedom Rally. Below is a short introduction to Misty in her own words.

“I am a 37 year old Native American and a survivor of both domestic and state abuse. I served 10 years in Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF) after leaving a violent relationship. While incarcerated, I was mentored by some amazing women [including some of CCWP’s founders!] and taught the true meaning of self-determination and resilience. I also learned the true meaning of terms like ‘modern day slavery, institutionalized racism, human rights abuse, and reproductive justice and rights.’ I was trained and encouraged by Justice Now, of which I am a founding board member. With empowerment and love, I now have the opportunity to work with CCWP in many ways, including media and policy work, as well as grassroots fundraising and movement building while training the next generations of activists within and outside CCWF’s walls.”
Over 400 people from all over the state – led by prison survivors-rallied in front of CCWF on Jan. 26, 2013. There were also simultaneous solidarity demonstrations in front of women’s prisons in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and London, England. Dozens of newspapers, radio programs and TV stations covered the protest. The rally shined a spotlight on the discriminatory level of overcrowding in the women’s prisons and let the CDCR know that we will continue to fight to bring our loved ones home!

Below is an excerpt from an Op Ed column which was published in the 1/24/13 Fresno Bee written by Windy Click, CCWF member and prison survivor and Angela Y. Davis, author, activist and professor emeritus.

“We are calling this a Freedom Rally because we are fighting for the dignity and humanity of our loved ones. We are fighting to bring them – as well as their families – home to communities that are safe, sustainable and strong.

We are joining thousands of prisoners and families when we declare it is past time to bring our loved ones home. It is past time to stop the prison and jail expansion that has devastated our communities. It is past time to stop the criminalizing of our families, friends and neighbors. It is time to end policies like Three Strikes that leave many to needlessly die of old age in cages. It is time to institute and expand parole for sick and elderly people. It is time to widen alternatives to imprisonment. Thousands of people in women’s prisons can be freed right now. Money saved by reducing the prison population could provide drug treatment, re-entry services, mental health support and job programs.”
THANK YOU FOR CARING AND LOVING US!

By Joy Cordes, CCWF

I saw the pictures of the rally outside of CCWF and it was awesome seeing the amount of support and well wishes we have outside of these prison walls. It was humbling hearing you all out there rallying for better conditions, better health care, freedom for the aging, giving a second chance to juvenile offenders. We see only as far as the inside of these fences so to be able to hear people we don’t even know, family members and friends, yelling, singing and demanding better care, was powerfully moving. How can we begin to say thank you for caring and loving us!
Supreme Court Disregards Sixth Amendment Issue - Reverses Williams’ Appellate Victory

Diana Block

On February 20, 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court in a unanimous decision upheld Tara Williams’ conviction, so reversing the 2011 ruling of the Federal 9th Circuit. As reported in The Fire Inside #46, the 9th circuit had overturned Williams’ conviction, stating that her Sixth Amendment right to a fair trial had been violated when a holdout juror was incorrectly dismissed by the court. The Supreme Court, however, did not address the issue of the Sixth Amendment violation. Instead, their ruling addressed the issue of the legitimate use of a federal habeas corpus petition after a state court has already ruled on the merits of a case. The 1996 Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) was enacted to place limits on prisoner rights to bring habeas petitions to federal courts to prevent so-called “frivolous” prisoner litigation. In Williams’ case, the state of California was joined by thirty-one other states in arguing that under the AEDPA, Williams had exhausted her state appeals process because the state courts had already “adjudicated on the merits” of her claim. Consequently, the Supreme Court rejected the 9th circuit’s right to rule on Williams’ case. They concluded that the federal courts have to “presume” that a state court has addressed the federal claims even if they do not explicitly state this in their ruling.

Tara Williams was a pawn in California’s effort to ensure that the AEDPA restrictions that strip prisoners of their habeas rights are strictly applied. CCWP agrees with the 9th Circuit that Tara Williams’ Sixth Amendment rights were violated. Tara was only 19 when the offense she was convicted of occurred. She wasn’t physically in the space where the offense was committed, yet she received an LWOP sentence. CCWP will support Tara Williams in her continuing fight to win her freedom. Please email or write us if you are interested in working on this important case.

Marsy’s Law applies to all ‘lifers’

On Monday March 4, 2013 the California Supreme Court ruled that the 2008 state proposition Marsy’s Law applied to all lifers, not just people sentenced after the passage of the law. The court ruled unanimously, saying that Marsy’s Law applies to all because, according to the judges’ ruling, it wasn’t intended to prolong punishment or change any inmate’s sentence. CCWP and all prisoner rights advocates DISAGREE.

The law was challenged by Michael Vicks who claimed that the law violated the ex-post facto clauses of both the state and federal constitutions because it retroactively increased punishment for his crime. Two lower courts had agreed with Vicks, but the higher court overturned them.

Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye wrote for the court, “Although multiple changes to the parole scheme contribute to longer periods between hearings, the changes have no cumulative effect that would create a significant risk of prolonged incarceration.” In fact, because of Marsy’s Law, if a person is denied parole they must now wait a minimum of 3 years before submitting a written request for a hearing. And they may be given a hit of up to 15 years! It seems clear that this ruling DOES prolong someone’s incarceration if they were given an indeterminate sentence such as 7-to-life, but now can be told they must stay another 15 years before they can even try for parole again. We hope the court battle will continue to overturn all aspects of Marsy’s law which has had a very negative impact on life-term prisoners.
The Way-Pass Program (Women’s After Care Program)

The Way-Pass program serves formerly incarcerated women attending City College of San Francisco (CCSF). It serves as a bridge to women transitioning from incarceration to education and strives to increase retention and educational completion rates among formerly incarcerated women at CCSF. Way-Pass services include outreach and support, case management, informal counseling, class planning and management, support groups and workshops, assistance with enrollment forms and registration, referrals to student supportive services at CCSF and community based organizations.

Way-Pass is presently run by Pearl Contreras, aka Mama Pearl. All the interns are formerly incarcerated. Way-Pass was created from a feminist perspective, shifting away from the criminal justice paradigm, to one of public health, healing and wellness.

On March 22, 2013, Way-Pass held the second annual Day of Community Wellness and Education. The event included an honoring of a Way-Pass employee Alycia Williams who was killed last year by her partner. CCWP members Samantha Rogers, Hafsah Al-Amin, Sandra Johnson, and Phoebe Vanderhorst attended.

Nicole Pettway was the keynote speaker. Patsy Jackson, senior case manager from the NOVA Program, performed an emotional and inspiring praise dance. Tandy Illes, faculty sponsor and Director of the Drug and Alcohol Program at CCSF, talked about upcoming events and the new scholarships for women in Way-Pass, which will be available later this year. Way-Pass co-founder Phoebe Vanderhorst spoke about the origins of the program and hopes for future that include housing, family reunification support, and micro businesses.

NEXT ISSUE: SOLITARY IN WOMENS PRISONS

The next issue will focus on solitary confinement in women’s prisons. Due to increased national attention about the widespread use of isolation in U.S. prisons, we are receiving many questions about the specific conditions that women and transgender people face in the SHU, Ad Seg, Control Management Units and other types of solitary confinement. We would appreciate information from people in California and around the country about this important topic.

Prison Health News is a print newsletter read by about 5,000 people who are locked up in prisons and jails across the United States. All subscriptions are free.

To subscribe or help distribute Prison Health News contact:
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Philadelphia, PA 1910
Tel:215.525.0460
The first thing that comes to mind when I think about mental healthcare in prisons is what an oxymoron it is. To be fair, I haven’t personally experienced mental healthcare by being a recipient of it, but I have seen the results through the women who are participants. Systems are set up to deliver mental healthcare and mental health staff are in positions of authority, but actual care or therapy is rare. Here would be a good place to point out that California prisons house more mentally ill than do mental hospitals.

There exists a prison mentality, a way of thinking that is hard to understand or even describe unless you have experienced it firsthand. It is a mentality of dominance and scarcity. There is an overriding premise that one group (the guards or those providing the ‘care’) must dominate prisoners in order to achieve ‘safety and security’ (the other prison mantra that underlies every policy, action, or interaction). The internal culture of dominance is so pervasive, so all encompassing, that it is truly astonishing. Being a registered nurse and coming from the field of mental healthcare, it was a hit-you-in-the-face, blow-your-hair-back kind of experience when I first arrived in prison.

Early in my incarceration, women learned that I was a registered nurse and asked me questions about the healthcare they were, or in most cases were not, receiving. One day Shirley brought a troubled woman to me. She was twitching her leg, having difficulty sitting still and focusing, but was able to tell me between incoherent mumblings that she was hearing voices. She couldn’t get the voices out of her head, and was afraid of what they might tell her to do. She was thinking of cutting into her head to make the voices stop.

I walked her over to the health clinic and explained the urgency to the staff. They responded in condescending and dispassionate terms. “We won’t see her without a pass from her housing unit.” I walked into her unit (going ‘out-of-bounds’ myself) and spoke to her housing staff. They responded, “Go away, you are out-of-bounds and could be written up. We know how to handle this.” The next day I saw the woman walking around the yard. Half her head was shaved and she had lacerations all through her scalp. She had obviously tried to quiet the voices on her own, to no one’s great alarm!

I wrote a grievance on Anna’s behalf about this staff assault. The system rejected the grievance because the rules say that one inmate may not grieve another’s concerns. Then I wrote a class-action grievance against the housing officers for not following professional conduct and abusing an inmate. The Administration registered my grievance and interviewed myself and other inmates brave enough to co-sign it. The guards continued to work the same housing unit, with no reprimands, no consequences, no fallout at all-unless you count the retaliation against those of us who spoke out. Little Anna has spent the last several years alternately being beaten up by her cellmates, who don’t understand her behaviors, or being drugged into a drooling stupor in the Specialty Care Unit.

There is little recognition of humanity in the prison system. We are considered commodities in the Prison Industrial Complex. The whole premise of the prison system is wrong. Punishing people for misdeeds does not promote public safety. When the acts of others, whether careless or with malicious intent, cause suffering and grief, we are much more likely to achieve genuine healing, reconciliation and forgiveness if the persons involved are acknowledged as possessing at least some potential for goodness, or an elementary level of humanity.

The prison system is an industry gone awry, gravely compromised and rampant with abuses. It is a terrifying breeding ground for anger, hatred, sexism, racism, homophobia, and dominating exploitation of other human beings. We are warehousing people, punishing them, and then returning them to society worse off than when they entered the system.
CDCR’s continued torture of prisoners is coming under more scrutiny. Below is a report from a recent California legislative hearing. Prisoners are fighting by filing lawsuits.

Sacramento, Calif.—On Feb. 25, about 100 people, mostly family members of prisoners organized as California Families Against Solitary Confinement (CFASC), gathered on the State capitol steps. They shared their stories before a historic second legislative hearing on CDCR policies regarding Security Housing Units (SHUs) prisoners. An estimated 5,000 prisoners are tortured in California by being subjected to extended solitary confinement, 2,400 of them for indeterminate time.

The prisoners’ hunger strikes in July and Sept.-Oct. 2011 pushed the CDCR to propose revisions to its policies. These revisions do not address any of the prisoners’ demands and in fact codify practices that are totally unacceptable. The prisoners promised that their demands would be met, rejected CDCR’s proposal and are planning another hunger strike for July 8, 2013.

After the rally, we filed into the hearing room to testify and refute the CDCR’s lies. Assemblyman Tom Ammiano opened the hearing by saying he was humbled that CFASC members held bake sales to raise money to make the trip. He ended the hearing by acknowledging that this is a “populist” issue larger than any hearing.

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A prisoner of the SHU wrote: “CDC refuses to change. How many others will be destroyed by this failed system? For human beings to decide to starve themselves to death speaks volumes to the conditions here in the SHU.”

SHU prisoner Eddie Garcia wrote: “I am a prisoner in Pelican Bay state prison, where I have been for over 23 years, the last 20 right here in the SHU. The fact is I am not here for something I’ve done. I’ve been kept in solitary confinement for photocopies of artwork I received from an art show. The majority of us are not here for gang activity. We are being kept in the SHU for drawings, artwork, saying ‘hi’ to someone, having a book or a magazine. Other reasons include things beyond our control: someone’s name being found in someone else’s cell, someone—whom you may not ever met—saying things about you.

Sitting in a windowless cell the size of a restroom for 23.5 hours a day for years on end, the lack of sun and human contact have affected us in many different ways: eye problems, skin disorders, allergies, breathing problems, high blood pressure, heart problems, sleeping disorders, and mental issues. These are brought on and made worse by being confined here for decades.

Being in solitary confinement is also affecting our chance at freedom. Many of us are serving life with a possibility of parole. We should be able to go before the board. But the board uses the fact that we are in the SHU as a reason to deny us a date.

Our families are also affected. The stress, worry, knowledge of what we are going through here is weighing on them. They have their own health issues, and it is hard for them to drive all the way across the state to see their loved one through a glass for only an hour and a half. Most don’t have money to come up here.”

Amber’s brother is in Pelican Bay SHU: “I want to say to the new family members who are here, who are standing up for their loved ones: stand strong, because you are never going to be alone in the struggle. Look around us, we come from various places, but we want CDC to know that we’re coming hard and we’re rolling deep.”
Dolores Canales said, “My life changed on July 1, 2011, when the SHU prisoners went on hunger strike. I knew my son had spent a decade in solitary confinement. I knew my son was unjustly held in isolation. I knew this, and I didn’t give it a second thought. Now, I cannot stop thinking about it.

“The National Institutes of Health and federal law prohibit research chimpanzees to be held in solitary confinement. It is seen as detrimental to their mental and physical health as they are social animals. Chimpanzees must be able to see and hear other chimps; they must be able to touch each other as well.

Human beings are being deprived of human contact and natural sunlight. Why is there no law to protect my son, your husband, your father, your brother, your sister, your loved one? We are demanding that they enact such a law in the United States of America!”

Hugo Pinell, 42 years in solitary, sent a statement: “In 1967 when I joined the liberation movement in San Quentin, one of the goals was to build a new man, the way Brother Malcolm X showed we could. We don’t know how long it will take to create that new, beautiful world. It might take generations. But if we continually work at it and try to create the new man in ourselves, we can achieve a personal freedom. I go through different changes to stay human for I will never get used to isolation and deprivation.”

The following day, CFASC lobbied for ending solitary confinement. We were surprised to find that many legislators had watched the televised hearing. One senator said “they have never seen a hearing like this one” and “a lot of light was shed.” The prisoners are determined to continue fighting until changes are made. For more information:

visit www.stopintolerance.ca and prisonerhungerstricksolidarity.wordpress.com

A DEMONSTRATION AGAINST SHU CONDITIONS IS BEING PLANNED FOR JULY 13, 2013 OUTSIDE CORCORAN PRISON

A mother of a SHU prisoner said, “History seems to be repeating itself. People used to hate other people because they were different. Hateful words were used for groups such as gay/lesbian, African-American. CDCR uses words like ‘dangerous,’ ‘they commit crimes,’ ‘they deserve to be in solitary confinement.’ Some people believe them, because they don’t try to find the truth out for themselves. Hopefully, with our voices, we can change people’s hearts as in the past we have done for other people. They are human beings, not animals. We will continue to fight.”
A mother said, “When I go visit my son, I see others who have been in there for 10, 20, 30, some over 40 years. It breaks my heart. What does that say about the future of my son, who has been there for ‘only’ four years? My son has not been able to touch his own son since he was three years old! We have to stand up and make changes so that families can be reunited, so we can touch them, so they can be treated as human beings. We’re not here to make CDC lose face. We just want you to do the basic human, moral thing.”

Another mother spoke: “My son is mentally ill. He was molested at 5-years-old. He needed help even before he went to prison. He didn’t get help then, he is still not getting any help. The families are lying awake at night wondering what is happening with their loved ones in their cells. I want to see my son! And I will keep trying!”

Former prisoners, family members and supporters of SHU prisoners

California Coalition for Women Prisoners invites and encourages all women and transgender people who have been or are on the inside to send us your writing, letters, artwork, or poetry.

The next issue will focus on solitary confinement in women’s prisons. Please send your stories, art and poetry.

We will not use your name unless you check the box below:

☐ I want my name to appear in the newsletter

Name: 

Mail to:

☐ I would like to get the next issue of The Fire Inside
Yes, I want to support women prisoners!

- Please contact me to volunteer
- Enclosed is $25 contribution to help send a newsletter subscription to a woman in prison
- Enclosed is my contribution of $ ________

Name: ____________________________________________________________
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Please make checks payable to: CCWP/LSPC, 1540 Market St., Room 490, San Francisco, CA 94102

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Come work with us!
CCWP volunteer nights are on the 1st Wednesday of every month at 6 p.m.
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Contact us: (415) 255-7036 x4
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Fax: (415) 552-3150,
Email: info@womenprisoners.org

CCWP Mission
CCWP is a grassroots social justice organization, with members inside and outside prison, that challenges the institutional violence imposed on women, transgender people and communities of color by the prison industrial complex (PIC). We see the struggle for racial and gender justice as central to dismantling the PIC, and we prioritize the leadership of the people, families and communities most impacted in building this movement.