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## **AT 'SUPERMAX' PRISON, ISOLATION IS THE RULE, WITH NO EXCEPTIONS; [FIVE STAR LIFT Edition]**

*By Patrick E. Gauen, Of The Post-Dispatch. St. Louis Post - Dispatch. St. Louis, Mo.: Dec 27, 1998. pg. C.1*

### **Abstract (Summary)**

Officials at Tamms Correctional Center, the only "supermax" state penitentiary in Illinois or Missouri, are equally adamant that inmates like (Richard) Flood, 37, a murderer from Chicago, are too dangerous for even traditional maximum-security prisons.

It is a national clash that began 15 years ago at one Southern Illinois lockup, the Federal Correctional Institution at Marion, and continues anew at the state's newly opened Tamms prison, 35 miles deeper into the Shawnee National Forest.

Fewer than 10 percent of the 255 inmates sent to Tamms so far are on mental health medication, (Kelly) Rhodes said, all for disorders that predate Tamms.

### **Full Text** (1922 words)

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\* Harsh conditions at Illinois penitentiary are certain to bring a legal fight.

Standing alone on a concrete floor in a concrete room with concrete furniture, Richard Flood peered through a perforated steel door and insisted that the state of Illinois is driving him crazy.

Literally crazy.

Officials at Tamms Correctional Center, the only "supermax" state penitentiary in Illinois or Missouri, are equally adamant that inmates like Flood, 37, a murderer from Chicago, are too dangerous for even traditional maximum-security prisons.

And there is no evidence that its isolation and tough rules make him or anyone else crazy, Warden George Welborn emphasized.

But litigation over the dispute is imminent.

It is a national clash that began 15 years ago at one Southern Illinois lockup, the Federal Correctional Institution at Marion, and continues anew at the state's newly opened Tamms prison, 35 miles deeper into the Shawnee National Forest.

Both are used to isolate and punish male inmates who attack others, lead gangs, smuggle drugs, plot escapes or rape cellmates.

Controversy is no surprise. Tamms' designers not only included a courtroom but consulted federal judges to ensure it met standards for civil rights hearings certain to come.

The MacArthur Justice Center, a Chicago-based law firm that does charity work for prisoners, is preparing to file a major challenge soon.

"The extreme isolation and control that exists there are damaging to people, we know it is," said Jean MacLean Snyder, a MacArthur lawyer. "A good number of those people are mentally ill. It exacerbates their illnesses and may trigger illnesses in some of the others."

But Kelly Rhodes is unimpressed. As the state's clinical psychologist at Tamms, she makes sure every inmate has weekly access to a counselor and is evaluated monthly.

With a high proportion of murderers and other violent felons, Tamms is by definition a home for up to 520 sociopaths - people who will not conform to society's rules. But that, Rhodes pointed out, is not a mental illness.

"We don't have any more people here depressed than at any other prison," she said. "They just get bored. There's no evidence that causes mental problems. It's not that we're not looking. If it's here, I really do want to find it."

Fewer than 10 percent of the 255 inmates sent to Tamms so far are on mental health medication, Rhodes said, all for disorders that predate Tamms.

Jan Susler, a Chicago lawyer who tried to fight similar conditions at Marion, said Illinois officials "are pretending they don't know people are injured and society is suffering. Either they're stupid, which I don't think is the case, or they're mean, which I do think is the case."

She said the hard living conditions at places like Tamms make inmates more dangerously anti-social than ever, threatening to send a virulent new breed of criminal predators back to the streets.

Owing to their long sentences, many never will see the streets again. Those judged eligible to return to other prisons will first be re-socialized with small-group living in a special unit. Rules say nobody is ever to be released directly to the public from Tamms.

Isolated population The \$73 million prison, opened March 9, is a nondescript complex of low buildings behind a pair of 12-foot fences, sitting near rattlesnake-infested bluffs. It is just outside the village of Tamms, about a 20-minute drive north of the Kentucky state line.

The site was chosen in part to bring good state jobs to a region of extraordinary unemployment.

Whether intentionally or not, it also insulates inmates from family and friends. Most of the state's residents - and criminals - live in the Chicago area, and Tamms is about as remote from Chicago as any spot in Illinois. Visitors face a drive of six hours or more each way.

Insulation, in fact, pervades the residents' lives.

Flood is typical. He spends at least 23 hours a day alone in a cell about 8-by-10 feet with stark furnishings: a concrete cylinder for a stool, a concrete bed with a cloth mattress, a concrete shelf for a TV or radio (but not both) earned only after six months of good behavior. The combination sink and toilet is stainless steel, like the mirror.

He can have books and magazines, including Playboy and Penthouse if he likes, although rules forbid pasting pictures from such magazines on cell walls. There are no phone calls except under court order or in emergencies, no cable TV, no smoking.

Meals on par with those served at prisons arrive through a slot in the door.

By standing on the bed, Flood can see out a squat window for a view of a little sky, a little foliage and a lot of razor wire. Drab, rust-colored steel cell doors are dotted with fingertip-sized circles that allow a view, albeit distorted, of guards passing by.

On his best behavior, a veteran prisoner can get four visitors and two \$15 commissary purchases each month, five showers a week and an hour a day alone in a bare exercise yard. Visits are conducted through glass partitions, even for consulting with lawyers.

New prisoners start with one visit, two showers and two exercise periods.

Nobody leaves a cell before his hands have been cuffed through a slot in the locked door. An escort team of two or three officers then adds leg irons. An additional officer may follow them from a grated metal walkway above, like a cloud ready to rain tear gas on any trouble.

Movements are synchronized so no inmate encounters another in a hallway.

The only physical human contact is the rubber-gloved hand of an officer, counselor, nurse or doctor. Inmates cannot see from one cell to another, although they can talk. Some call out chess moves to opponents, each keeping track of the game on his own board.

This is a marked contrast to most prisons, where even maximum-security residents usually have cellmates, move without chains, eat in lunch rooms, play group sports and work in support roles or prison industries.

Rooted in reforms That relative openness became a danger and an embarrassment in Illinois, where 1,000 inmate assaults on staff were registered in 1995, and a bootleg videotape revealed in 1996 how notorious mass murderer Richard Speck enjoyed drugs and sex eight years before in the Stateville prison outside Joliet.

Tough reform measures, including the opening of Tamms, provided a new hammer to get control of Illinois' 42,000 inmates. Assaults across the prison system are down by half since then, Welborn said.

"Nobody ever wants to come here," he emphasized.

The minimum stay is one year. The maximum is indefinite, which played on the minds of several inmates interviewed in their cells last week.

"I think a lot of people who come here ain't going to leave here," said Guadalupe Delacerda, a 43-year-old murderer from Chicago who has served 21 years of his 70-year sentence. "I hope I do."

No weapons or drugs have been found so far in the searches every 10 days at Tamms, Welborn said. The only assaults have been spitting or throwing of urine or feces.

Inmates inclined to do that soon find a plastic shield installed over their cell doors. Wherever human contact is a threat, it is removed if possible.

The intense, high-tech security is expensive: It costs \$35,000 a year to house a Tamms inmate, twice the average at other Illinois prisons. The main reason is a ratio of one correctional officer on the payroll for every two inmates.

Lt. Lori Wild, who had 15 years of experience as a guard at other prisons before transferring to Tamms, said it is the best assignment in the system. "We have very little contact with inmates," she said. "Unless we make a mistake, they're virtually incapable of hurting us."

But for Flood, a former ironworker who served time at the Menard Correctional Center in Chester before Tamms, the same circumstances make it the worst assignment for a prisoner.

"Any length of time a human being lives in these conditions there is a psychological danger," he said. "You start to lose touch with reality. You become depressed. You become incoherent."

For Robert Westefer, a 41-year-old armed robber from DuPage County doing life as an habitual criminal, the conditions are dehumanizing. "Just to go to the law library you've got to be strip-searched," he said. "You get buck-naked twice. It's humiliating."

Some, like Westefer and Flood, are in "administrative detention," meaning they are at Tamms because they were considered potential threats to the operation of a regular prison.

About 60 percent of the prison's inmates are in another category. They were already isolated under similar conditions in segregation units of other prisons but continued to be violent or disruptive.

Their lives at Tamms may actually be a little better: at least it has air-conditioning and windows.

Only prison behavior - not crimes on the outside - determines who goes to Tamms. Nobody is there for personal retribution either, Welborn insisted.

Westefer claims he was yanked to Tamms only because he once spit on Welborn as warden at Menard. "Everybody here has done something (to irritate) somebody at the Department of Corrections," the prisoner complained.

Responded Welborn: "Absolutely untrue."

Transfers to Tamms follow established procedures with reviews to assure prisoners' rights, the warden said.

As evidence of fairness, he noted, 10 percent of the inmates referred by other wardens to Tamms for "administrative detention" are sent back within days for lack of persuasive evidence.

In Welborn's desk drawer sits a black binder that has become a sort of handbook for supermax prisons - the full court decision that forced changes at California's equivalent, called Pelican Bay. All Tamms employees must read it.

The design of Tamms took Pelican Bay into account. Cell windows and perforated doors, for example, were responses to judges' concerns about isolation.

"We believe we operate a constitutional prison," Welborn said. "It is humane. We don't abuse inmates."

Marion became the prototype in 1983, going on permanent lockdown after the slayings of two guards and an inmate.

A federal court rejected a challenge of the similarly severe conditions imposed there.

Since then, the federal system built a new supermax prison in Colorado, and nearly 40 states have adopted some version of their own.

Missouri is not among them and has no plans to join, according to Tim Kniest, spokesman for the Department of Corrections.

"Each system is different," he explained. "The federal system and larger states have different needs from the smaller states. We have been able to manage our population (almost 25,000 inmates) within our five levels of security."

Like Illinois, Missouri uses segregation units to separate disruptive inmates within regular prisons.

Although the other 24 Illinois prisons are overcrowded, Corrections officials have decreed that Tamms must never be full if it is to meet its mandate as a deterrent.

#### **[Illustration]**

PHOTO, MAP; Caption: (1) Color PHOTO by ODELL MITCHELL JR. / Post-Dispatch - A Tamms Correctional Center inmate is viewed through a cell door at the new Illinois "supermax" prison. Inmates are sent to Tamms for disciplinary infractions at other prisons. (2) Color PHOTO by ODELL MITCHELL JR. / Post-Dispatch - Handcuffs and leg irons are used to shackle prisoners each time they leave their isolation cells at the prison. Several officers escort inmates when they move around outside their cell. (3) Photo by Odell Mitchell Jr. - Tamms Correctional Center Warden George Welborn at the 'supermax' prison. (5) Post-Dispatch Map - 'Supermax' prison - (location of Tamms penitentiary)

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