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INMATES SUE STATE, CALLING NEW TOP-SECURITY PRISON CRUEL; [NORTH SPORTS FINAL Edition]

Christi Parsons, Tribune Staff Writer.. Chicago Tribune. Chicago, Ill.: Jan 8, 1999. pg. 4

Abstract (Summary)

When the state opened its new super-maximum security prison in Downstate Tamms last year, prison officials compared it to Alcatraz and promised that inmates would dread going there.

The prison is all that it was cracked up to be and more, according to a class-action lawsuit filed Thursday by four Cook County convicts serving time at Tamms Correctional Center, located about 40 miles south of Carbondale.

State prison officials offer a different analysis of Tamms, which they say is having a positive effect on the prisoners. They also say that inmates at other institutions are behaving better out of fear that they will be sent to Tamms.

Full Text (529 words)

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When the state opened its new super-maximum security prison in Downstate Tamms last year, prison officials compared it to Alcatraz and promised that inmates would dread going there.

Now, 10 months after the prison opened its doors, four inmates are suing the state for cruel and unusual punishment.

The prison is all that it was cracked up to be and more, according to a class-action lawsuit filed Thursday by four Cook County convicts serving time at Tamms Correctional Center, located about 40 miles south of Carbondale.

In the suit, filed in U.S. District Court in Chicago, the inmates contend that the state is violating their constitutional rights by subjecting them to near-constant monitoring and cell confinement, as well as sensory deprivation. In many cases, inmates go outside only two hours a week.

Lawyers for the inmates say this treatment is making the prisoners--especially those with serious mental illnesses--meaner, sicker and more violent.

State prison officials offer a different analysis of Tamms, which they say is having a positive effect on the prisoners. They also say that inmates at other institutions are behaving better out of fear that they will be sent to Tamms.

The prison is reserved for inmates who have repeatedly threatened or harmed other prisoners at the other institutions around the state, prisoners whom officials frequently categorize as "the worst of the worst."

When the state opened the prison last March, the plan was to make it the most restrictive institution in the system. Unlike inmates at other institutions, Tamms' prisoners are monitored in their cells almost constantly. Whenever they leave their cells, they are chained at the legs, hands and waist and have a hands-on escort from two guards.

During their first six months at Tamms, they have only two hours a week outdoors, and that time is spent in an exercise cage bare of any equipment. They cannot smoke, work out with weights or, for at least six months, watch television.

Critics considered the approach misguided before the prison was even built.

"Tamms specializes in sensory deprivation and heavy control," said Jean Maclean Snyder, one of the attorneys with the MacArthur Justice Center at the University of Chicago who filed the suit. "Often, these people are seriously mentally ill to begin with. When they get there, they are going to get a lot worse."

Three of the four plaintiffs, all identified in the lawsuit only by their initials, have attempted suicide while at Tamms. One of the inmates, referred to as "R.B.," has repeatedly cut his arms and neck and bashed his head against walls, the suit says.

In another case, Snyder said, an inmate tried to hang himself with a torn sheet. The prison staff's response was to write him a citation for destroying state property, she said.

But prison officials think the system is working. They attribute a dramatic decrease in assaults on prison staff statewide in the past year in part to Tamms, although the drop corresponds with several other reforms.

In the 1996 fiscal year, there were 1,219 assaults on prison staffers throughout the system, according to the Illinois Department of Corrections. In the 1998 fiscal year, there were 681 attacks.

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