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Lawsuits not unexpected with get-tough prisons

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Abstract (Summary)

A lawsuit against the Illinois Department of Corrections alleging improper treatment of inmates at the so-called "Super Max" prison in Tamms is no surprise.

Inmate lawsuits are not uncommon - although laws regarding frivolous cases have caused prisoners to think twice, rather than risk paying filing fees and court costs from their trust fund accounts, usually used to buy "extras" at prison commissaries.

Institutions designed to be tougher than average - such as Tamms - are frequently targeted, not just by inmates acting on their own but by prison reform/civil rights groups.

Full Text (353 words)

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The MacArthur Justice Foundation of Chicago is handling the Tamms lawsuit, filed in federal court in Chicago.

If all of the allegations in the lawsuit are true, corrections officials may have crossed the line.

Inmates claim they have been taunted and forcibly injected with sedatives and that mentally ill inmates have been denied needed counseling.

However, if this is simply a case of inmates whining under harsher than expected treatment, they deserve little sympathy.

Tamms is supposed to be tough. It is supposed to be a place in which no inmate would want to be incarcerated - one where those who have been there never want to return.

Inmates are kept in their cells at least 23 hours a day and do not have the exercise and recreational equipment typically available at other institutions.

In a similar suit against the Pelican Bay prison in California, a federal judge said strict isolation is not cruel and unusual punishment. The judge did rule that access to mental health professionals is required and Illinois officials say mental health care was increased at Tamms because of the Pelican Bay ruling.

When the government gets tough with inmates, one can expect lawsuits - and worse.

In Arizona, three former inmates have been charged with conspiring to murder that state's prisons chief in retaliation for a crackdown on gangs in prison. The crackdown includes solitary confinement of key gang members.

Arizona Corrections Director Terry Stewart's reaction to the alleged plot was: "We can't cave in."

Illinois officials should not "cave in," either.

Be humane, but be tough.

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