

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE JUDICIARY
COMMITTEE ON PRISON DISTURBANCES
JANUARY 17, 1990

Good afternoon. My name is Michael Hackman and I am the Director of Volunteer Services for the Pennsylvania Prison Society (PPS). I would like to thank the House Judiciary Committee for providing this opportunity to offer input into the events surrounding the recent riot at SCI-Camp Hill. As Director of Volunteer Services, I am responsible for administering our Prison Visitation Program, which is composed of approximately 100 volunteers in 28 chapters, spread throughout the Commonwealth. Chapter members monitor prison conditions in county jails and state prisons, and respond to individual inmate and family concerns via interviews and on site intervention.

Acting in an Official Visitor capacity, PPS volunteers have access to any prisoner housed within a county or state correctional facility, and in doing so have developed a solid understanding of prison life from both an inmate and staff perspective. Volunteers also work closely with the Advocacy Program in educating family members, law makers and the public about criminal justice issues.

In the days and weeks that followed the Camp Hill riot, our office was deluged by letters from confused and angry inmates and phone calls from frightened and frustrated families and friends. In addition to the flow of calls and letters, I had an opportunity to tour the facility on November 16, 1989 as part of an effort to monitor compliance of a federal action brought by the A.C.L.U. on the inmate's behalf.

Through direct contact with the society's Philadelphia office, and channeled through volunteers in the field we received close to 200 inquiries from inmates and their relatives. The nature of the calls and letters can be

broken down into four main categories: Inmate Abuse, Inmate Location/- Safety, Family Visitation, and Destruction of Personal Property. In describing the concerns expressed by inmates and their families, especially in the area of prisoner abuse, it is important to point out that although we received many allegations we are not in a position to either substantiate or dismiss the claims. As the Prison Society has no official investigative power we can only act as a vehicle to express the thoughts of those impacted by the riot.

I Inmate Abuse

The Prison Society received approximately 75 calls and letters from inmates and family members alleging a variety of abusive acts that occurred both during, and in the days following the riot. Inmates described situations in which they claim to have been beaten by correctional officers and State Police Troopers while being ordered out of their housing units, while being held in the main yard for 3 days and while being returned to their cells after order was restored.

I would like to read excerpts from a few letters so that committee members can get a feel for the nature of the allegations...

As I toured the prison last November inmates on every block had stories to tell about mistreatment and beatings by security staff. Several inmates held in the Restrictive Housing Unit claimed that they were beaten repeatedly and threatened with more violence if they didn't keep their mouths shut.

Other allegations of inmate abuse included:

- limited or no access to medical care for several days after the riot, as well as disruption in administering prescriptive medicine.

- Exposure to the Elements - Inmates claimed to have been confined outside in the main yard for three days and nights in which the temperatures dropped below freezing, with little or no protective clothing.
- Verbal Harassment from correctional officers and state police and threats of physical violence in retaliation for injuries sustained to prison staff.

II. Inmate Location/Safety

This was another major issue brought to our attention, specifically by families, relatives and friends of Camp Hill inmates. Panic stricken mothers constantly called our office pleading for some information about the whereabouts and well being of their sons. Although the prison did set up an information hot line, families complained that information regarding individual inmates was difficult to obtain, inaccurate and/or unavailable.

For example, one woman called our office to complain that Camp Hill staff initially told her that her son was not injured in the riot and was being held in one of the remaining cell blocks. As she found out two weeks later, however, her son was shot during the disturbance, spent a week in the hospital and was transferred to another state prison and placed in their hospital unit.

Mail delivery was another significant problem for inmates and relatives, as incoming and outgoing letters were not processed for several weeks after the disturbance. The communication blackout only added to the fear and frustration of family members.

The transfer of inmates to other state and federal prisons also proved to be an information nightmare. Families complained that they wouldn't hear from their loved ones for weeks then one day receive a post card or call from institutions as far away as California and Washington. This revelation, of course, further confused and frustrated families as most knew little or

nothing about the federal system.

III. Family Visits

Due to the extensive damage, lack of staff and emergency lock down status, family visits were suspended for approximately two months. When they did resume in December, visits were limited to one hour, once a week under close supervision.

Family visits play an important role in maintaining stability within the prison population as well as keeping the external family unit together. The extended suspension no doubt added to an already tense relationship between inmates and security staff.

IV. Destruction of Personal Property

The fourth main concern expressed by inmates and relatives dealt with the destruction of inmate property. Inmates alleged that personal property was destroyed or stolen, in cell blocks that were actively not involved in the riot or sustained fire damage. The property that did escape destruction has been slow to find its rightful owners and is presenting real problems for inmates transferred out of the state.

In summary, we believe that it is important to remember that there are many victims of this unfortunate event: inmates who didn't participate in the riot but suffered the consequences, families who had to endure days of fearing for the safety of their sons, brothers and fathers, prison staff who were physically injured and emotionally scared and ultimately the public who must foot the bill to rebuild Camp Hill.

The Prison Society does not condone the violent actions of inmates who actively participated in the rioting but, understands the anger of those who did not participate and in some cases even protected correctional staff. Finger-pointing will no doubt continue for some months and even years, but

it is our hope that this committee and the public at large consider the real culprit in this riot: prison overcrowding.

As long as we continue to pack more and more people into a limited space and use prison as a crime prevention tool, the possibility for future prison riots exists. We ask that the members of the Judiciary Committee and their colleagues in the full House explore, alternatives to incarceration and population reduction programs to ensure that the events of October ²⁵⁻²⁷~~26-28~~ won't be repeated. Thank you.

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