

TESTIMONY To PA House
Subcommittee on Crimes & Corrections

BY: Fred & Mary Faber at SCI-Camp Hill (5-23-2000)

First we'd like to say Hello! And Thank You to the Pennsylvania State Legislators attending, the PA House Subcommittee on Crimes and Corrections, and the various PA Criminal Justice Reform Groups which are a part of the Lobbyist Coalition for giving us this opportunity to be heard, willing to take this monumental leap forward, by hearing our concerns and possibly finding resolutions to the serious problems currently affecting our correctional system. Before we begin our testimony we'd like to state that we were very reluctant to come here today because of my brother-in-law, my wife's brother, Joseph Dallasta, who is incarcerated in the State of Pennsylvania; because we fear and do not want any retaliation or retribution against Joe, as has been known to happen when families come forward in situations like these. He's already been through quite a lot at the hands of some of the staff at Graterford.

- **Grievance & Administrative Procedures:**

Just to give you a little insight on what's going on my brother, Joe, received a threatening letter against his life. He was placed into the SNU(Special Needs Unit) at Graterford. When he got to the SNU it was so cold in there, that to give you an idea of how cold it was the guards were wearing coats. By the way this happened to be one of the coldest weeks of the winter and there was snow on the ground outside. On top of it all he put in a grievance and never received a reply back. The SNU committee tried to get him to sign a statement saying, "**I do not fear for my life and request to be placed back into population.**" **Joe refused to sign** and the staff members marked it "Refused to Sign" and it says that F.Field, R. Crawford both initialed next to were Joe refused to sign this statement. They marked under this that *they were now Transferring Joe to the RHU (Restricted Housing Unit) due to concerns over threating note and inmates ambivalence about signing above disclaimer.*

We were shocked first that they transferred him to RHU a unit which is "Locked Down" 23 hours a day, with no TV or other privledges and he was the one who received a threatening note, they

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were punishing him by placing him here. On our first visit to Graterford's RHU, visitors must go behind the wall, driven in by a guard, to the inside blocks, as we were walking up to the L-Block RHU there was an inmate yelling out the window of his cell, "It's freezing cold in here," "there's No heat," "I've put in Grievances and no one is listening to me, you've got to please, please let someone know." The guard made a sarcastic comment yelling back at the inmate saying, "You think it's cold in there, why don't you come out here and see if you like it?" And my wife in disgust said, "Oh my GOD, I can't believe this!"

While in RHU Joe put in a grievance in mid January 2000, which was returned to him a week later marked with a post it note, "Not correctly filled out, use DOC handbook to fill out properly." The RHU staff told him that there in RHU they don't have handbooks to fill these out. He inquired further as to how he should proceed to file his grievance and he was told to direct it to Superintendent Vaughn's attention, which he did and he received no reply back. On 1-25-2000 he filed yet another grievance and received nothing back. It was only when he finally was placed in the THU (Therapeutic Housing Unit) he filed a grievance dated, 2-27-2000, which was finally received by the person who handles the grievances. The simple fact is they denied all grievances on technical grounds or don't put them through, in Joe's case in this particular instance alone it happened three times. And the only reason we succeeded was because our brother Joe, had us, his family backing him up and also because he persevered. What about all those other inmates out there who aren't so fortunate, their cries go unheard....

- There's an area of concern involving "Misconducts." Inmates who are heavily medicated mainly in the RHU and SNU areas of the prisons have a difficult time getting up to stand up for count early in the morning at about 5:30 a.m., some of these inmates are so heavily sedated they can't wake up or

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have a hard time keeping their eyes open; however, staff will write them a misconduct just because they don't stand up on their feet for count.

- Another area of administrative concern is the fact the when a new inmate arrives at a facility (say his crime is murder, or rape, or whatever it may be...) the unit managers/counselors pass this info along to the guards, who pass it along to some inmates, who circulate the info amongst themselves, so that it doesn't take long for everyone to know what you're crime is and this causes problems amongst the inmates.
- During cell checks at some institutions, inmates are handcuffed to the cell gate while their cell is searched.
- Inmates must submit a list of phone numbers for their call out list. This is a list they are going to call family members, etc... They then must wait for the list to come back approved with at special pin number they use to make the calls with. On top of the phones there's a sign that says that their calls are "Monitored." And not only that the state rakes in millions of dollars extorting the families of inmates, while at the same time violating the families constitutional rights of "PRIVACY."

Mail that comes to our house is stamped as clear as day on it "Inmate Mail - PA Department of Corrections." This also appears to violate "PRIVACY" Laws against the families of inmates, because it identifies the type of mail that it is. What is the reasoning behind having mail labled in this manner.

- One final note on things that were taking place just prior to the subcommittee hearings at Graterford. For the longest time the same guards handled the visiting processing and areas. The same dreary look was visible. Then just before the Graterford hearings we find out that for the first time ever, the prison placed "rubber non-slip strips" down on the floor near the showers so the inmates wouldn't

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fall. The SNU/RHU areas who formerly were on small portions of food, were getting about the size of a TV dinner now. The front main entrance to Graterford was being painted and spruced up, as well as, the visiting areas too and they installed new security camera equipment which they had never had before. And now the guards were being rotated on a more frequent basis, with guards we had never seen before.

CLOSING THOUGHTS:

- To start an Independent Committee, not made up of any Department of Corrections officials or connected in any way with the DOC - It should be TOTALLY INDEPENDENT! This committee could be made up of legislatures or ordinary people appointed by this PA State Subcommittee today, but the main requirement is that no one from the DOC or their affiliates should have any connection or input into the Independent Committees decision making or actions. We believe that instead of scheduled visits, which are many times scheduled months or even a week in advance should no longer be the main operating method. The independent committee should be able to walk into an institution, show their credentials and say what they'd like to view or what area they'd like to see and immediately without much ado be taken to where they requested to see.

Grievances should also be handled by an Independent Committee, perhaps either the same one that will oversee the Department of Corrections -(From Secretary Horn at the top, to the lowest level of the DOC) - this Independent Committee would handle and process all Grievances, perhaps revise or institute a new Grievance process or procedures. This committee would handle the Grievances for ALL PA State DOC institutions and respond to them in a timely fashion. Further, so that no one other than the Independent committee views the Grievances they should either be placed in a certified mail envelope and tape sealed so that no one could open it and dropped in a special box that only the Independently appointed grievance committee has a key to. OR Placed in an unalterable envelope,

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with a special number imprinted on the outside unique for each envelope and a matching removeable sticker which would peel off as the inmates copy, containing that special ID #, so that when the grievance is recieved back by the inmate the numbers should match the one the committee has marked on the form as having recieved. And the envelopes could be sealed with a tape that would show void if removed or altered in any way.