

ACLU Lawsuit Challenges Grossly Inadequate Conditions At Canyon County Jail (1/9/2009)

Severe Overcrowding Forces Prisoners To Sleep On Floor, Live In Unsanitary Facilities

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BOISE, ID – The American Civil Liberties Union and the ACLU of Idaho today filed a class-action federal lawsuit challenging the indecent, cruel and inhumane conditions that exist at the Dale G. Haile Detention Center, one of three structures that comprise the Canyon County Jail in Caldwell, Idaho.

Filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Idaho, the lawsuit charges that overcrowding is so severe at the center that prisoners are frequently forced to sleep on the floor and shower in facilities teeming with toxic mold and rust.

"The conditions prisoners at the Haile Detention Center are forced to live in are abhorrent and fall far short of constitutional requirements," said Stephen Pevar, a senior staff attorney for the ACLU Racial Justice Program. "The overcrowding is so overwhelming that it taxes every aspect of the facility – including ventilation, staffing and plumbing – past the breaking point. Sheriff Chris Smith inherited a bad jail, and despite some fine efforts on his part conditions remain overcrowded and generally deplorable. All else has failed which is why this lawsuit is necessary."

According to the lawsuit, the center's population consistently exceeds its designated capacity by more than 100 prisoners, and despite the fact that it has over 100 more beds than allowed under Idaho Sheriff Association (ISA) Standards, there are often not enough beds to accommodate every prisoner, forcing many to sleep on the ground.

Amanda Davis, one of six named plaintiffs in the lawsuit, entered the detention center late last year when she was five months pregnant. There was no empty bed available for her to sleep on so a sheriff's deputy assigned her to a place on the cold cement floor. She was given one thin mattress to sleep on, and when she requested a second mattress for additional support, the jail's medical staff informed her that pregnant women qualify for a second mattress only when they enter their third trimester.

The severe overcrowding also limits the ability of the detention center's staff to adequately classify prisoners. Thus, prisoners who should be kept apart because of their age, crime, predatory nature or predilection for violence often are housed together, increasing the risk of violence in the detention center.

In their 2007 inspection report, the ISA determined "overcrowding would seem to be the inherent problem that creates security issues, tasks the staff and the physical plant [and] makes it very difficult to keep up maintenance, cleaning and refurbishment of the facility." This report noted these conditions are "the basis for the liability that the County shoulders and an ongoing reason for concern." The ISA's 2008 inspection report reiterated that conclusion.

"No one should be forced to live in the kind of overcrowded conditions that exist in some of our jails and prisons across the state," said Lea C. Cooper, staff attorney with the ACLU of Idaho, who is co-counsel on the case. "It is imperative that our state and local leaders commit themselves to addressing this problem and ensuring that the state's prisoners are provided living conditions that meet constitutional minimums."

The lawsuit also charges that the detention center suffers from inadequate ventilation and temperature control, inadequate fire protection and inadequate plumbing.

Today's lawsuit comes just one week after more than 100 prisoners rioted at the Idaho State Correctional Institution following their transfer to temporary housing to accommodate the return of 300 state prisoners who had been housed in Texas because of a lack of space in Idaho.

"The kinds of conditions that exist at the Haile Detention center should force all of us to consider the impact of our society's over-reliance on incarceration," said Monica Hopkins, Executive Director of the ACLU of Idaho. "A commitment to policies that emphasize alternatives to incarceration – especially for first-time and non-violent offenders – not only would be more humane but economically sound as well."

Lawyers on the case include Pevar, Cooper and ACLU cooperating attorney Joe Miller.

A copy of the complaint is available online at: www.aclu.org/racialjustice/gen/38272|gl20090109.html

Additional information about the ACLU is available online at: www.aclu.org

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