

State Senator Wm. N. Brownsberger
Second Suffolk and Middlesex Dist.
State House, Room 504
Boston, Mass. 02133-1053

May 10, 2016

An Open Letter On The Special Management Unit And The Role It Plays in Criminal Recidivism

Dear Senator Brownsberger:

Prisons are a public utility, and today services in these places are bit by bit being taken from prisoners. This devolution of basic essential services is contributing to a dangerous breakdown in institutions.

As a result of a fight, I found myself recently in the Special Management Unit of the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center here in Shirley. Conditions in this segregation unit, like many others across Massachusetts, are deplorable.

Rather than focusing on deprivation of personal property and essential hygiene required under Department of Corrections policy I want to share with you the psychological effect of being subjected to the noise of cruel voices yelling from cells and its impact on prisoners recidivism.

Convicts scream from behind heavy steel cell doors. Like lunatics in an asylum, most cry out about nothing to nobody. One is immediately struck by the lack of care for psychological welfare in these guarded forbidden places. Yet, words hit like a fist.

During my ten days confinement in segregation, I witnessed a prisoner verbally terrorize another with cruel taunting, shouting, and branding. Inmate James H., a twenty-two year old gangmember emotionally terrorized with his words a sex offender with troubling emotional challenges, Daniel B.

From morning to night, inmate James H. would scream from his cell "rapist, skinner, and ripper." Dim witted Daniel B. would ramble incoherently as James H. encouraged other inmates to shout from their cells. Guards and prison officials did nothing to put an end to this deeply grotesque spectacle. Sadly, events like this occur in Special Housing Units throughout the system.

Guards and prison administrators have the tools to discourage and eliminate the cruel practice of verbal harrassment and threats hurled from behind segregation cell doors - but nothing is done. Often such attacks on vulnerable inmates become a real danger to inmate safety and the safety and security of the institution.

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Prison officials have created a miserable pressure cooker of our prisons. Overcrowded conditions, warehousing bodies, and inadequate rehabilitation programs contribute to the miasma our institutions have become. Attitudes shaped when prisoners are permitted to yell from segregation cells callous labels like "Rat," or "Skinner," or "Ripper", only intensify the pressure of these places.

The public is not ready to accept or confront the horror of modern prison life. As a culture we collectively believe American institutions do the right thing, and that prisoner's are being humanely treated. Sadly, prisoner's are routinely mistreated and the incarcerated are not being adequately rehabilitated.

Prison's like Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center offer a unique opportunity to shape behavior, yet this opportunity is squandered. These self approving institutions fail because there is no oversight, no scrutiny. Business as usual is a roadmap to financial waste. Make no mistake, the budget for housing and maintaining state prisoners is \$494 million dollars, (FY2016 Mass.gov).

Politics govern state prison's everywhere. There is also a convict political system which govern daily institution life. And all recidivism begins in these prisons and jails. Attitudes are shaped behind bars. Attitudes which are shaped when prisoner's like James H. yell the words "Skinner," and "Ripper" from the anonymity of a solitary cell.

Today, the public is learning about the not so subtle manipulation of branding and labeling from politicians running for office. This ugly branding and labeling of prison inmates has been allowed to go on for years behind bars. Labeling and branding certain inmates with particular crimes "skinner," "rapist," "rat," and "gangbanger," etc. contributes to recidivism upon release.

It is curious, but true, that when a prisoner enters a segregation unit there are no rules of conduct presented. No rules of conduct are posted. Inmates placed in these segregation units are left to their own to create their own environment within the structured protocol of these places.

Words hit like a fist. Cruel and offensive shouting from cells is the only way angry violent prisoner's have to act out. Predators lurk behind the steel cell doors of segregation. It is time prison's like the maximum security Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center enforce some kind of rules discouraging and eliminating the practice of prisoner's screaming from their segregation cells.

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Days passed, and Daniel B. remained a victim of James H's street smart thuggish taunting. Finally, Daniel was able to contact his family who called the facility; he was moved off of the unit. What is a shame is that it took a phone call from a family member to end this verbal abuse. Many prison inmates don't have family or friends able to contact these prison's under such circumstances.

Senator Brownsberger, please post this letter on your web site which focuses on criminal recidivism. Also, I recommend to you and your readers my non-fiction account of life and living in a modern Massachusetts prison: "Escaping Shirley World," part II was recently published through Prisons Foundation Press, www.prisonsfoundation.org. Further, I urge you and your readers to visit my series of essays "Prison's Dirty Secret: The Special Management Unit," published through "The Journal of Prisoner's on Prison, " (Univ. of Ottawa Press), www.JPP.org.

Very Truly Yours;

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Cc:

Ms. Lois Ahrens, Dir. "The Real cost of Prison Project," (enclosure).
Prof. Kevin Walby, Ed. "Journal of Prisoner's on Prison," Univ. of Ottawa