Researching Human Rights in Texas Prisons

Rosenfield Program in Public Affairs, International Relations and Human Rights

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What I Did

My primary focus this summer was writing a draft of a legal complaint PJL planned to submit to the Department of Justice asking them to investigate the practices of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The complaint focused specifically on the use of excessive force by staff and the high rate of sexual assaults at Texas prisons. In addition to working with another student to draft this complaint, I read, responded to and catalogued correspondence from hundreds of inmates throughout Texas and wrote several blog entries for the organization’s social media outreach campaign.

Main Issues Presented

Sexual Assault

- In 2008 five Texas Prisons had sexual assault victimization rates of more than twice the national average. Most notably,
- At the Estelle unit (prison) 15.7% of inmates were assaulted once or more
- At the Clements unit (prison) 13.9%
- Four years later, 25% of the prisons nationally identified as having unusually high inmate on inmate sexual violent were in prison. Most notably the Montford Psychiatric Facility at 8.4%
- Texas was also found to be operating two of the worst facilities for staff sexual misconduct rates. In fact, the Clements unit was the highest in the nation at 9.4%
- Equally troubling is the rate of sexual victimization at the Clements Unit where 8.1% of inmates reported sexual victimization by staff involving force or threat of force
- Multiple inmate’s accusations of sexual assault were ignored by officials. In violation of both national and state legislation.

In addition there were hundreds of inmates, or more, denied legally mandated “safe keeping” status because of previous victimization or demographic characteristics making it more likely that they would experience sexual violence in the future.

- Compile data on the denial of medical care in Texas Prisons.
- Write blog posts to support outreach campaigns.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank both PJL and Grinnell College for giving me the opportunity to pursue my passion this past summer. Without help from both entities my summer in Austin would not have been possible. In particular, I would like to thank both theCLS and the Rosenfield Program at Grinnell College for giving me the funding in order to make living in Austin, Texas a reality. I would also like to thank Erica Gammill and Jason Phillips, my supervisors at PJL, and all the others of PJL for all their wisdom, support and hard work. I know it was not easy trying to read 1,112 letters in a tiny office space. I would lastly like to thank my family and friends for putting up with me as I adjusted to life in Austin.

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Future Plans

After graduation I hope to continue working in prison reform. Particularly I would like to use my background in psychology and work with mental health and the prison system. I hope to work with this issue at an organization like PJL that allows me to work one-on-one directly with inmates and its larger, research and advocacy in informing policy. Not only because I enjoy the balance, but also because I believe that the best way to effect reform is to employ both a top down and bottom up approach.