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## Maine State Prison: Oppressively limited access to legal and educational resources

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**IMAGINE** that you were conducting research, and then producing in type-finished form documents discussing opinions, arguments and perspectives (yours and those of others) for the purpose of conveying your insights and reasons in support of your objective to another person or persons, particularly such as professors or judges, attorneys and paralegals, toward the end, of course, of eliciting a particular response—an understanding/opinion-ruling, grade, or action in relation to subject matter involving a great deal of information that has been accumulated over a period of years, AND, you can only read/review pertinent material and then type a few paragraphs or pages of text per week because you only have access to needed research resources and word-processing tools in two, at most four short periods lasting between 40 minutes to at most 2¼ hours, per week. It would of course be impossible for you to even come close to conducting the necessary research and producing the work-product that would be capable of eliciting a favorable critical review. In a legal matter involving a serious civil or criminal matter where a person's future life and liberty hangs in the balance, to prevent their access even to those resources they would need in order to have what could be considered as placing them on the outermost edges of having somewhat of a reasonable chance of gaining any measure of a favorable outcome from the civil, criminal or appellate courts, is a horrible act of oppression, especially when you consider that every year countless persons are acquitted of criminal charges, and as plaintiffs or appellants prevail in civil actions or criminal appeals. Evaluation of professed injustices should be a fair process but it's too often not.

**IMAGINE if for a year of your life**, you could only produce work-product on just *one aspect* of *one project* of import to you, and, that to the exclusion of every other matter in your life requiring study and the production of type-finished documents, because of your limited access to resources it took all of that year to complete just that one project that under marginally reasonable conditions would have taken no more that a period of days, at most a week or two to complete. HOW would the losses due to your inability to focus on other matter affect your life? Suffice to say that at the very least, depending upon what position you were in when this oppression began; things would very likely be bad for you.

At Maine State Prison, the library and Law Library are in the same space separated by a wall and door in a large building referred to as the "Activities Building" where prisoners have access to a variety of other activities such as an outside jogging track, sports and weight lifting-exercise equipment, religious services, an education dept., etc..

In 2½ hour periods per day prisoners have access to all sections of the "activities building" 7 days per week except for the two that are arguably the most vital to prisoners rights and rehabilitation: the Education Dept. and library-law library, both of which are closed on weekends—and for *other* miscellaneous reasons—because the library supervisor as well as Education Dept. personnel are positions classified as "non-essential staff," and therefore do not work on weekends or holidays, and other days for a number of *reasons*. Additionally, the library closes 15 minutes before the rest of the activities building.

**SIDEBAR:** At Maine State Prison, convicts are cooped up in an increasingly dense packed cellblock (recently increased from 56 to 66 to 79 men) for 90-95% of their waking lives'—that is unless they're giving themselves over to being slaves to the Maine prison industrial complex working in jobs that either do or do not pay a wage that in some small way justifies their efforts. This constancy of dense convict warehousing foments multiple forms of conflict and is in a word, rather two: *outrageously rotten*. Unlike county jails where sentenced inmates are serving less than one year terms, prison is essentially a small town where convicts spend years, often many. It is a place where these individuals should, from sunup to sundown have opportunities -access to programs and resources that will aid in their developing an improved worldview toward becoming better prepared to meet the exceptionally steep obstacles and challenges most of them will face upon rejoining mainstream society. (95% of the prison population returns to mainstream society. Approximately 170 -225 prisoners are released annually from Maine prison facilities).

What Maine State Prison does with convicts on a daily basis results in an outrageous disservice to the unaware and often indifferent public. (This comment branches off into an article regarding prison reform where the matter concerning library-law library such as discussed on this page is but one small part of).

The library/law-library, like the rest of the activities building resources is almost never accessible for the 2½ hours scheduled because "mass movement"—when prisoners are released from their housing unit for the walk and sign in process at the activities building (about 5 minutes) does not occur until 20 to 60 minutes—or more—of the "rec-period" has passed.

The following is the library schedule of a California prison in 1971:

CTF Library: Sun/Mon Closed all day. Tue, Wed, Thurs, Fri, Sat: 8:15 to 11:15 a.m.; 1:00 to 4:00 and 6:30 to 9:00 p.m.; an average of 42½ scheduled hours per week opposed to the 10 that are scheduled per week at MSP, as stated herein that very rarely reach 5-6 hours. Moreover, the word processor access is as mentioned below, even tighter. (Robert J. Minton Jr., "Inside-Prison American Style," p.19 ©1971)

The library/law-library is closed every week on at least one of the five days scheduled—at present Thursdays—because the librarian is in the *Special Management Unit* (SMU) passing out paperback books to prisoners in solitary confinement (23 hour lockdown). At *normal* prisons this procedure is done—*very easily no less*—by prisoner trustees in a manner that ensures sufficient security measures.

Also on a regular basis for any of several reasons or proffered excuses the librarian simply does not show up to open the library on at least one or more days every week, or for some other *reason* (Staff training, staff meetings, so-called security measures etc.), library access is cancelled. I cannot remember the last time the library was open more than 3-4 days per week. At most, no more than 5% of the reasons for the library being closed are valid, however, being that the librarian is classified as "*non-essential staff*" no one much cares—except the prisoners needing access—when the librarian fails to show for work. Moreover, it should not be the librarian's but rather the prison's responsibility to make certain that the library is open. (As stated, on average, the library is open 2-3 days, give or take, per week)

In the law-library section of the library there are four (4) computers equipped only with Westlaw.com for legal research. In the main library are four (4) computers equipped only with Microsoft Word. These resources must serve the needs of 850+ prisoners. Access to the word-processing computers is achieved *by appointment only* in sessions scheduled for 65 to 80 minutes (The 80 minute session is most often less than one hour because of the above-stated late releases for "*mass movement*") As for producing quality work-product in type-finished form; posted in front of the computers is Library Computer Rules, two of which state: • **Do not save documents on the computer.** • **Save at your own risk. The documents may be deleted or modified at any time without notice.** Prisoners can save whatever documents they're working on but *without* password protection. "Flash-drive" portable document storage devices are not available. (At MCC prison in Windham, Maine, prisoners are given "floppy-discs" that are kept in a file by a library clerk). With Maine State Prison's system any prisoner or staff member can read and copy the prisoners' confidential legal documents. Imagine having to retype an entire page in order to correct minor errors regarding work-product that will be critically reviewed. In order to resume work in progress the prisoner must gain access to the same numbered computer (1-4) where their document(s) *are* or *are not* saved—a period separated often by days or even a week or more. If the document has been erased they must start over from scratch. When the errors could be amended in seconds, it is overwhelmingly frustrating, the valuable time consumed to have to retype entire pages, during brief periods that are already *way* too limited to begin with.

In the "computer lab" in the Education section of the activities building at all times sit eleven (11) computers equipped with Microsoft Word, 70 to 90 % of which gather dust daily. In order to print documents the prisoner/student must obtain a floppy disc from a clerk whereon they save the document to be printed after which the disc is erased. There is one disc to serve all students. (**Very few** prisoners who do not qualify for Adult Basic Education/G.E.D. can gain access to the Ed. Dept, and to become enrolled in post-secondary education without paying \$220.00 is almost impossible. The \$220 only covers 'Liberal Arts courses' toward an AA/BA degree—which raises subject matter of another article that currently sits in hand drafted form gathering dust in my cell concerning inadequate academic and particularly *vocational* resources at the Prison.

Under the herein-stated conditions a lawyer or professional student could not conduct needed research and produce quality type-finished work-product in a timely manner. ? How can it be justified, the imposition of such conditions upon stressed racked convicts with far more limited education?

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Maine State Prison