

Department of Corrections?

– Or –

Department of Control?

by Christopher Balmer

One of the main focuses involving the Pennsylvania prison system is solitary confinement, which will always be an issue debated amongst human rights advocates and even some mental health experts. Reality has proven itself time and time again that solitary confinement has permanent psychiatric effects, especially when used long term. People suffer constantly in isolation. But why? An illogical individual would say, "Oh, well, they should have followed the rules."

I question the Pennsylvania prison system about their use of the word "corrections" when using it in relation with a department. Is the prison system a Department of Corrections or a Department of Control? To answer this question, let us explore the use of solitary confinement within the Department of Corrections.

When a person confined commits the smallest infraction, a piece of paper is filed against the inmate called a "DC-141 - Inmate Misconduct Form". As a result he or she is sent to a place called the Restrictive Housing Unit (solitary confinement) to serve a maximum of ninety (90) days for each institutional charge filed against him. Ultimately, the inmate's fate is left up to a man called the Hearing Examiner, who naturally takes the misconduct report as more credible than what the inmate will ever say to rebut the charges. This man determines how long you will stay inside the darkness of solitary confinement.

As the readers can see, solitary confinement is a place designed to house an inmate to punish him in punitive segregation – a place where he is even stripped of physical contact with family, other inmates, a phone call, and even an adequate tube of toothpaste. The name "Restrictive" is defined clearly here when housed in these units. Remember, even for the smallest infraction, for failure to stand for court or tucking in your shirt, voicing your opinion in a blunt fashion, etc., can lead to a placement in a place where you could end up coming out mentally distraught or not even make it out because the psychological pressure forced you to lose your mind.

Then you have the people who are mentally ill and are isolated in these units for years at a time, racking up dozens of years worth of misconducts. These misconducts range anywhere for attempting suicide, self-mutilation, refusal to obey an order, assault, destruction of property and a lot of other infractions of institutional rules. Keep in mind, these are mental health inmates, those who are in need of treatment – the same treatment the Department of Corrections promotes to the public that they provide. Instead, like myself, they are provided more isolation time for harming themselves. (For example, I have received nearly nine hundred (900) days of

isolation time for self-mutilation. Instead of treatment, I was punished.)

Correctional officers are trained to perform a job consisting of care, custody and “**control**”. They do not provide avenues for treatment that these mentally ill inmates should receive. Instead, the mentally ill are dealt with accordingly in a manner to control them and their behaviors. Regardless whether their behaviors are associated with the symptoms of their mental illness or not, they are treated just as non-mental health prisoners.

Again, how can this be a Department of Corrections when prisons are designed to control the alleged criminal?

The final answer is, it is not a “**corrective system**”. Prisons from the beginning of development were designed to break and control the criminal’s behavior. What the Department of Corrections promotes to the public is totally false in regards to rehabilitation. They use the Restrictive Housing Unit more than they use treatment opportunities. If they cannot control you, the Department does everything to force you into compliance with the rules of the institution.

For example, if an inmate refuses to come out of his cell either because he is afraid or just does not want to come out of the cell, the Department of Corrections assembles a team of eight adult men dressed in riot gear, wielding shock shields and gas to enter the inmate’s cell, beat him and drag him out. First, they administer a dose of chemical gas inside the inmate’s cell that causes the inmate’s skin to burn and his lungs to collapse, forcing him to his knees. An inmate at SCI Rockview, in April 2012, died because of this same chemical gas after the gas was shot into his cell in the attempt to force him out. He was protesting because the officers denied him his food. This is another tactic used to force an inmate into compliance: starvation.

If the inmate fails to voluntarily come out after the spray (gas) is shot into the cell, the team of eight fully grown men rush into the cell, shocking the inmate who is defenseless with a shock shield and attack him with nightsticks to remove him from the cell.

Is this correction or control? I would say control. There is no correction involved when beating an inmate senseless to get him out of his cell or shocking him like a cow to get him to move. These are methods of control. Or also known to the inmates as methods of torture.

As expressed before, there are no “corrections” in the Department of “Corrections”. Before the public believes a spokesperson who supports the goals and policies of the Department, regardless whether such policies or goals are wrong, look at the behaviors of the Pennsylvania prison system and ask yourself if what the Department of Corrections promotes to the public is true or false.

I have suffered six (6) long years in isolation, watching my fellow convicts kill themselves, harm themselves, get abused, medically neglected and suffer just as I have suffered. All in a little unit called the Restrictive Housing Unit (isolation), a man's life can be stripped away from him. Even for the smallest infraction.

Now ask yourself. Is this a **Department of Corrections? or a Department of Control?**

I think you know the answer.

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