

Response of Prisoners' Legal Services to Correctional Officers' Union Press Statement on Violence at Maximum Security Prison

January 13, 2020

This past Friday, a disturbance broke out at Souza Baranowski Correctional Center (SBCC) in Shirley, MA, the Commonwealth's maximum security prison, and three officers were reported to have suffered injuries. PLS' sentiments are truly with those injured on Friday and with their families, and with the people incarcerated in that prison who are living under similarly dangerous conditions. An assault on anyone in the prison should be condemned because violence unchecked only serves to condone a culture of impunity.

It is wrong and irresponsible for the Massachusetts Correctional Officers Federated Union (MCOFU) to suggest, as it did in their press statement released on Friday January 10th, that reforms designed to improve conditions for staff and prisoners alike are responsible for the violent climate at SBCC. To start, the DOC has been very resistant to implementing the law and conditions for prisoners in SBCC have not changed significantly since its passage. MCOFU complains that limiting the use of solitary confinement and increasing programming directly inspires and encourages violence against staff.

To be clear, despite the CJRA, solitary confinement is still regularly practiced in Massachusetts. In fact, those with serious mental health diagnoses and who have not even been disciplined for an infraction still find themselves sitting in solitary confinement despite the law. Prisons and jails across the country where similar reforms to solitary confinement practices have been implemented along with adequate training and buy-in from the administration are proving the opposite. Those states that embraced the reforms and implemented the training needed to do it right are seeing the benefits: a decrease, rather than an increase, in violence, a reduction in recidivism rates, and millions of dollars in taxpayer savings. The key difference is that they have leaders who believe in the reforms and who invested the time and energy required to change.

PLS, which tracks reports of assaults by staff at prisons and jails across the state, consistently documents more assaults on prisoners at Souza-Baranowski than any other prison or jail in Massachusetts. But press releases and videos are not sent out by the correctional officer's union or posted when such serious assaults occur. And it does not take much browsing online to discover the dehumanizing mentality of some (not all) of the officers who work in that prison. Unfortunately, MCOFU's reactionary rhetoric only serves to fan the flames of such sentiments and to work against the safety of its own members.

Officers wield tremendous power over the daily lives of prisoners. PLS has conducted dozens of independent interviews with SBCC prisoners in recent months that reveal a clear pattern of collective and harsh punishment of all for the misconduct of a few and arbitrary retaliation from officers such as withholding food and unjustifiably confiscating personal property such as family photos and letters. Further, prisoners at SBCC experience regular lockdowns during which they are in their cells for days on end for 24 hours a day. They also have very little access to rehabilitative programs that can help them earn time off their sentence and prepare for reentry. Idleness contributes to the toxic environment in that prison.

It is a tragedy when anyone is seriously injured in a prison. It causes stress and pain for that individual's loved ones and should be prevented to the extent possible. However, blaming the CJRA for Friday's violence is misleading and damaging. MCOFU's position illustrates that the barrier to improving conditions for both officers and prisoners at SBCC and throughout the DOC is not the recent passage of evidence-based reforms like those that have been successful in dozens of other prisons and jails. Rather it is the refusal to change and to believe that those in the Commonwealth's custody are not animals, but, in fact, are as human as the correctional officers who work there. They have children, parents and grandparents and, to borrow a quote from Bryan Stevenson, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done."

PLS welcomes any and all opportunities to work with MCOFU and the DOC to create a prison climate where both prisoners and officers are safe. The current environment in SBCC does the opposite. It is a harmful environment that sends those incarcerated back to the community more damaged than when they went in and without the tools to succeed.

Instead of blaming a law that has barely been implemented, we should wholeheartedly embrace it and just maybe we'll reap the same benefits other states have and improve safety for all of us.

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Prisoners' Legal Services promotes the safe, humane, and lawful treatment of Massachusetts prisoners through civil rights litigation, administrative advocacy, client counseling, and outreach to policy makers and the public.