



Abuse of women at Missouri prison ignored by facility officials

Vandalia MO: USA | May 17, 2012 at 6:34 AM PD

By Stephen Pope

PART 1: This is Part One of a three-part investigative report that details the abuse of women at the Vandalia, Missouri Prison. This first part documents the sexual abuse of seven women, the significant and deliberate delay of medical and mental health care, and blatant refusal of medical personnel to respond to and treat the offenders' medical conditions.

This is not the first time the Vandalia Center has come under scrutiny for abusing offenders. According to an article that appeared in the Missouri CURE's (a grassroots prisoner advocacy group) publication, "*Turning Point*," Vandalia Center officials refused investigators from the U.S. Department of Justice entry to the prison in 2003 after the suspicious death of Stephanie Summer- who died while in the center's custody and other cases of alleged abuse.

According to Audrain County Circuit Court records Mark Isgrig a guard, pled guilty on January 27, 2012, to two counts of assault in the third degree, both misdemeanors that resulted from his sexual misconduct with offenders during pat searches. He has yet to be disciplined for his conduct.

Just at the city limits of Vandalia, Mo.-- a quaint little town of a little over 2000 residents, in rural northeast Missouri on Highway 54 -- sits the Women's Eastern Regional Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center, a complex of eight uniformly red-painted buildings surrounded by a nine-foot fence and home to some 1,500 convicted female felons.

Most of the offenders identified in this report have been given pseudonyms, not only to protect their personal privacy but also to hopefully prevent corrections officials and guards from learning their true names and taking retaliatory action against them. Those offenders whose names have not been concealed have provided me with very little cooperation and had no idea the true purpose of my work at the Vandalia Center.

What really happens behind the prison gates on a daily basis is privy only to the guards and prison staff who are forbidden to talk about it-to the media. Several offenders upon their release have tried to enlighten the public about the abusive treatment they received, but few pay attention or take notice; after all, these allegations are coming from convicted criminals with an apparent agenda.

On June 5, 2011, this author was transferred from Ozark Correctional Center where I had twice been commended for my good work. A published journalist, I spent a year inside the Vandalia Center quietly working as a guard, yet at the same time witnessing and documenting appalling, illegal and inhumane treatment of offenders.

Several offenders have cooperated to help me tell a story that is filled with

abuse of all types. This abuse was not just verbal or emotional; Warden Angela Pearl permitted Isgrig to sexually abuse several women over a period of time. Isgrig fondled female inmates' breasts under the guise of doing pat or frisk searches.

Guard had fondness for large breasts

Department policy mandates that guards use the back of their hands when performing frisk searches on offenders of the opposite sex. But according to several Probable Cause Affidavits filed by Department of Corrections Investigator Joey E. Runyon, Isgrig singled out offenders with large breasts and used the front portion of his hand to fondle them, in direct violation of Department policy and the training he received.

Because these women are victims of sexual abuse, their real names will be replaced with their initials. Corrections officials became aware of Isgrig's sexual abuse on April 7, 2011, according to an Affidavit of Probable Cause filed by Runyon in Isgrig's criminal case on June 28, 2011, when the correctional facility's Chaplain told Runyon that offender [L.B.] had reported the evening before that while on her way to a religious service, Isgrig stopped her and groped her breasts.

Runyon alleges in the affidavit "On April 6, 2011 at approximately 7:00 P.M. offender [L.B.] was attending a religious service at the WERDCC Chapel....offender [L.B.] approached the Chaplain and told him she needed to speak to him immediately. In the Chaplain's Office, offender [L.B.] alleged that she was frisk searched just prior to the Chapel Service and the officer [Isgrig] groped both her breasts during the search." In the same document, Runyon says that 6 other women have made "similar allegations" of sexual abuse by Isgrig. In this document, Runyon says that the Chaplain "reported [L.B.'s allegation] the following day."

The affidavit notes that [L.B.'s] complaint was reported to Warden Angela Pearl the next day, but Pearl still permitted Isgrig to work around offenders until at least the very end of June, which enabled him to sexually victimize several other offenders.

According to an Aug. 10, 2011, affidavit filed in the case, one offender, [M.G.], complained to Runyon that from "February 2011 through May 2011, she estimated she'd been subjected to 25 to 30 pat searches by C01 Isgrig. During the search of her upper body-Isgrig would lift her breasts with his palms facing upwards and proceed to squeeze both breasts." According to this document, other offenders noticed-some would attempt to distract Isgrig when M.G. needed to pass by so she could escape the invasive search, Runyon said in the document.

At some point in late June 2011, Isgrig was prohibited from entering the secure area of the Vandalia Center, thus revoking his access to offenders. In or around mid-December 2011, he was transferred to the Northeast Correctional Facility, a male facility in Bowling Green, Mo. According to state records, Isgrig remains

employed as a guard despite his convictions and his admitted sexual abuse of two of the seven women.

Court records state that Isgrig was sentenced January 27, 2012 to two years' probation, a 15-day suspended jail sentence, 100 hours of community service to be completed in six months, and total fines and court costs of \$118.50.

Federal law allows for lawsuits against abusive guards

According to the United States Civil Rights Act of 1983, each victimized offender has the right to sue Isgrig for their abuse as well as Pearl for not immediately revoking Isgrig's access to offenders. These lawsuits also could potentially include the Missouri Department of Corrections for failing to properly supervise Isgrig, Ruynon and Pearl, making the DOC liable for hundreds of thousands of dollars in damages, including attorney fees for each victimized offender.

In a similar though more widespread situation in Michigan, the Michigan Department of Corrections was forced to pay out a whopping \$3.8 million dollars in 1999 to settle lawsuits involving guards sexually abusing female offenders.

The sexual victimization of women by male guards takes on additional seriousness when viewed in the context of widespread sexual abuse that plagues many female offenders throughout their lifetimes. According to a 1999 study entitled "Prevalence and Severity of Lifetime Physical and Sexual Victimization among Incarcerated Women" published in the International Journal of Law and Psychiatry, "when all forms of violence are considered together, only 6 percent of respondents did not report experiencing one physical or sexual attack during their lifetime." More than 70 percent reported severe physical violence as children; more than half of all respondents reported sexual abuse as children or adolescents; and 75 percent of all respondents reported experiencing severe physical violence by intimate partners in adulthood."

Thus, according to the study and several others which report similar findings, sexual and emotional abuse of women offenders can have a severe and life-long detrimental impact on the offender experiencing the abuse. This emotional abuse includes but is not limited to yelling at the incarcerated women, threatening them with discipline that guards or staff know they cannot carry out or have no intention of taking -- and the withholding of food and basic necessities, all of which occur daily at the Vandalia Center.

Medical, mental health care denied

Sexual abuse is not the only form of mistreatment at the Vandalia Center. Medical and mental health care is also being withheld from offenders.

According to a March 22 memo from Assistant Warden Jackie Thomas, "Offenders are not getting seen by Mental Health or Medical in a timely manner. Mr. Thomas will discuss this with the Functional Unit Managers ("FUM") at the FUM Meeting on April 26," more than one month after the date of the memo -- a

delay that could have negatively impacted offenders' medical or mental health. Indeed, Functional Unit Managers are not even the right staff to address the issue; they direct housing units, not medical or mental health.

Women who come to the Corrections Center often arrive with a myriad of medical issues. Many suffer from seizure disorders, yet when one is actually suffering from a seizure, guards are under strict instructions not to call Corizon, the DOC contracted medical provider. The only exception is if "they hit their head" during the seizure.

The following is an e-mail I received from my supervisor, Sgt. Brian Thomas on Jan. 30 in response to my complaint about the center's seizure policy. Thomas responded, "It (is) Corizon's policy to have them sent in a wheelchair after the seizure, unless the offender hits their head. We are trained in first aid and are supposed to give immediate care if need be. If the situation was to get worse then we give care and update medical so they can respond. When the offender stops, she is to be sent to medical."

According to several guards at other Missouri Corrections Centers that I spoke with, Corizon responds whenever they are called for whatever reason. One guard said "this policy does not exist state-wide when you call medical for anything, even a hangnail, they come."

The medical care at the Vandalia Center is often lacking to say the least. After offender (Jenette) had a seizure that lasted more than five minutes, I had to falsely say that she hit her head, otherwise Corizon never would have responded. All the Corizon nurse did was take her vital signs and with help from other offenders, I assisted her back into bed.

I asked Joleen Hopke, a Licensed Practical Nurse for an explanation of Corizon's policy of not responding to seizure-related calls Hopke said: "We won't come unless they hit their head-most of them are faking their seizures anyway."

Thomas' e-mail neglects an obvious fact: What may seem like a seizure, may indeed be something far more serious or life-threatening. One offender for example appeared to be having a seizure but was actually suffering from a high blood pressure crisis; she was promptly placed on a backboard and taken to the medical unit, but not before I disregarded a supervisor's directive not to call Corizon for assistance.

More generally, the medical unit systematically disregards the pain and suffering of the offenders. Those offenders experiencing migraines or severe pain after a tooth extraction or other painful procedure are turned away and told – "this isn't an emergency, come back during sick call."

Part Two of this series continues to document the abuse of female offenders, a guard putting dog food in an offender's food, the mistreatment of women experiencing a suicidal or emotional crisis, withholding of food from an offender, guards advocating the shooting of offenders and more.