

Abuse of women at Missouri prison ignored by facility officials: Part Three

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BY Stephen Pope

This is Part Three of a three-part investigative report that details the abuse of women at the Women's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center in Vandalia, Missouri. To read Part One [click here](#). To read Part Two [click here](#).

Guards eat as much as they want at tax payer expense--offenders go hungry

Despite guards getting extra food trays for themselves, extra food on their trays and as many sack lunches as they want, offenders while in Housing Unit-6 (the Reception and Orientation Unit), go hungry every day, as do many other offenders throughout the facility. The Housing Unit-6 offenders eat supper at 3:15 P.M. and are not allowed to eat anything else until close to 5:00 A.M. the next morning.

Often Housing Units I and 6 guards will intentionally order extra "sack lunches"

knowing that they will not be needed because the Reception Center has already closed or no offender is in medical. These "sack lunches" are thrown in the trash or eaten by the guards, at tax payer expense and in clear violation of Department and Vandalia Center policies.

Up until several months ago, Housing Unit-6 offenders could, provided they had money in their "prison account," order food, but this was summarily stopped. They endure their daily hunger for up to six weeks until they are "classified" and assigned a permanent housing unit.

The guards and other prison staff eat or obtain their meals in the "Personnel Dining Room" and at times, different food is prepared for staff than is prepared for offenders, in violation of policies and Warden Angela Pearl's April 5 memo. Last summer, I recall that an entire batch of hamburgers that were cooked for offenders were given to guards and staff because the kitchen staff didn't believe the offenders deserved a special meal, claiming some offenders talked too loud in the kitchen while working that day.

Apparently, the issue of guards getting extra food and extra portions became an issue that Warden Pearl, according to information I was told by several guards, was forced to address. In her April 5, memo Pearl said "Due to work assignments, shift worked and the inability of the majority of institutional personnel to leave the institution, one meal per day will be provided free of charge for all institutional personnel in accordance with IS10-1.9 Meal Service Operations." Additionally, in her memo Pearl emphasized to guards that "Menu items and portions will be the same as provided for offenders..."



Guards assigned to housing units routinely walk to the “Personnel Dining Room” to get a tray for themselves: Call it laziness, being vain, or perhaps an attempted show of their very limited authority, guards often make an offender walk to the dining room with them and carry their tray(s) back for them. In all fairness to a few guards, some do it if they are bringing back several trays they obtained for other guards they are working with, and give the offenders credit for extra-duty. However, most guards make an offender carry back only one, the guard’s personal tray.

Offenders who violate Department of Corrections or Vandalia Center policies potentially face a variety of possible consequences. They could receive something as simple as a verbal warning, although most never do, to being placed in administrative segregation (“the hole”), or placed in a white suit and restricted to their rooms for usually ten days. In between they can be issued a Conduct Violation, a kind of formal charge in which they are always found guilty by their Caseworker, no matter what defense they assert at the “hearing”, or they can be given extra duty. By policy, this extra duty can be written for between 1 and 16 hours, although with little exception, most guards issue the full 16 hours no matter how trivial the violation.

Offenders punished for asking for toilet paper and sanitary napkins

Offenders have been given extra duty for coming out to the Rotunda to simply ask for a roll of toilet paper or sanitary napkins a few minutes prior to ten minutes before the hour, for standing in someone’s doorway and chatting for a few seconds, or for sharing coffee with a fellow offender who may not have the money to buy any—or for something as simple as having shower shoes on just a little past the bathroom/shower area.

Offenders work while in prison, most earning between \$7.50 and \$8.50 per month. The hours are long and hard, yet they are still expected to complete their extra duty within the given time-frame. When they ask certain guards like Emmie Oberhaus, Jeremiah Wood, William Parker, Ammy Moore, Timothy Geary and many others, these guards can never seem to find a simple task for offenders to complete to assist them in completing their extra-duty.

It is known that some guards give two to three hours credit for a task that just takes moments to complete. I simply gave whatever an offender asked for, usually at the very least two hours of extra duty credit, because of the absurdity of the extra duty process and because most will never be able to complete the required hours; the offender will not be granted an extension and will then face getting a Conduct Violation. So a few select guards, very few indeed, including me, are known by some offenders to simply sign the pink extra duty form giving the offender at least two and at the most four hours of credit.

Guards withhold basic necessities from offenders

Offenders are given three rolls of toilet paper once a week. Obviously, this is not enough to sustain them through the week. Consequently, offenders can seek sanitary napkins and toilet paper from the “Rotunda Officer” in most housing units from ten minutes before to the top of the hour. Unfortunately, all too often, offenders are engaged in going to the bathroom, changing their laundry, ending a telephone conversation with a family member or

other such activity, and I have witnessed many times offenders appear at the Rotunda literally a minute or two late and have been denied both sanitary napkins and toilet paper. Again, guards like Emmie Oberhaus, Nyla Reighley, Richard Peters, Jeremiah Wood, Todd Paige, Daniel Wombles, Richard Murray, Patsy Colbert and others are the biggest abusers of offenders over toilet paper and sanitary napkins.

I have witnessed time and time again, actually, too many times to count, all of the guards named—as well as others—tell offenders to “come back in an hour.” At times, offenders have pleaded with the guards that they have “an “emergency” and need sanitary napkins only to be told (especially, but not limited to, guards, Colbert, Oberhaus, Wombles Wood, Reighley, Peters and others), “I don’t care about your emergency” or “Do the best you can,” or “Go borrow one,” knowing that a lot of the women suffer from communicable diseases and “borrowing” a sanitary napkin can place them at some sort of risk.

The Vandalia Center is one of two Missouri prisons for female offenders and is Missouri’s only reception and orientation center for females. This means that every female offender who serves prison time in Missouri whether they end up at Chillicothe Correctional Center or the Vandalia Center initially gets processed at Vandalia.

Offenders given inadequate clothing and shoes that cause injuries

Whether an offender has been incarcerated multiple times or this is her first time, she still is treated to dehumanizing processing while in reception. During this so-called in-processing, they are fingerprinted, photographed and, if lucky, given a full set of gray or brown uniforms. I have witnessed many offenders in the dead of winter being issued boots that are several sizes too large, not to mention with holes in the soles or worse yet, the soles having come half-way off, leaving the offenders to walk in snow or rain essentially in their socks. Their literal begging for another pair of boots falls on the guards’ deaf ears.

On one occasion, I noticed offender (Cindy) walking with a limp and when I determined that several staples were protruding through the bottom of her shoes which were sticking into her feet, I promptly used my authority to get her some new shoes, but not before being told by a guard “That’s what the bitch got issued; that’s what she will keep until her Caseworker gets around to getting her some new boots.” My act of kindness in escorting (Cindy) that same day to Property and demanding her shoes promptly be exchanged, earned me a reprimand by Thomas.

Unfortunately, some offenders initially get issued one to two uniforms or jumpsuits, far less than what they are supposed to get. Yet, as a result they have to wear the clothes for 3-4 days because guards refuse to give them fresh ones, despite only having to take a few steps and open a closet to do so. The women only get to do laundry once a week during their approximate six week stay in “reception.”

Offenders ignored or verbally abused for asking guards basic questions

The hunger, lack of clothing and perhaps in (Cindy’s) case and others the issuance of dangerous clothing and shoes is not the only problems offenders face in “reception.” I have routinely heard guards while working in Housing Unit-6 (and everywhere else at the Corrections Center), refer to offenders as “bitches and sluts.” Most guards with the exception

of Leach, but especially guard Carla Archer, on a routine basis, answer the simplest questions asked by offenders in a terse and condescending manner—that's assuming they answer the question or respond to the offender in the first place.

I have witnessed offenders asking simple questions of guards through the intercom system, for example "How can I get a toothbrush?" or "How do I go see the dentist?" or "How do I get medicine for my migraine headache?", only to be told in a cold and condescending manner "Get away from here," or "We're busy" (when they really aren't), or "Talk to your Caseworker", when the guards could provide simple answers to these very simple questions.

Some offenders with drug or other substance abuse problems are given an opportunity by their sentencing judge to participate in the Gateway Residential Substance Abuse Program.

Most of the Vandalia Center's Gateway "Counselors" are considered to be a "Recognized Associate Substance Abuse Counselor-1" ("RASAC-1") To be considered a "RASAC-1 "counselor" all one has to do is have demonstrated thirty days of work in some type of substance abuse program and complete an "ethics course," according to the Missouri Substance Abuse Professional Credentialing Board website.

Apparently the Program at the Corrections Center is filled with problems, at least according to two women who just completed the program, (Jennifer) and (Fran), and from what I have witnessed.

Gateway counselors threaten offenders and discuss their private sexual encounters during public sessions

Both (Jennifer) and (Fran) provided me detailed accounts of Gateway Rehabilitation counselors who are supposed to be helping offenders overcome their substance abuse addictions, instead talking openly about their personal sex lives in both a group setting and during a one-on-one session while an offender was trying to get help with her fears about going home. According to (Jennifer), (Fran) and several other offenders who I interviewed during my tenure at the Vandalia Center, offenders are constantly threatened with not completing the program, and thus serving substantially more time in prison if they assert their rights and question the abusive practices that are occurring on a daily basis at the Vandalia Center, and during their Gateway "treatment."

"I feel along with may (sic) other that this program is very mentally & emotionally abusive," (Jennifer) said in a written statement given to me. [Jennifer] further wrote "[Many of these girls are afraid to stand up in what is right because we are told we will receive unessful (sic) completion' in our treatment program, per Ms. Trish White. Ms. White is very unprofessional, she use's (sic) foul language, for example she just f***** her man the night before, but he's just a sperm donor." (Jennifer) is referring to the unsuccessful completion report that will be given to the sentencing judge who then has the option to remove an offender from the program and make her serve her original sentence, or a percentage of it.

(Jennifer) tells of another offender who was far along in her pregnancy when she was admitted to the substance abuse program and went into labor. According to information I have received from several offenders, guard Richard Peters told the pregnant offender when

she sought medical attention for her labor, “I didn’t know pregnancy was a life or death situation.” Happily, the offender successfully gave birth to her child, despite Peter’s refusal to allow her to promptly seek medical attention and has completed the program, according to sources I have spoken with.

Gateway counselors make sexual gestures in front of offenders: One labeled a racist

(Fran), a recently released offender and successful participant of the program, told me in a recent written statement, “Ms. Trish White is extremely inappropriate and unprofessional. She talks about her sex life to her clients, she is racist and favors the African American clients over the white clients.....Her and Ms. Carol Rhoads are very inappropriate; they touch each other and make sexual gestures.”

(Fran) then complained in her statement that “I had a [one-on-one] with Ms. Trish White last week and was crying the whole time I was in the office the hole (sic) hour all she talked about was having sex with her new man.... People have filed IRR (sic) and nothing is being done about it. I believe it is being covered up by the Director Sara Scott. One client was saying that she could not have children due to medical reasons and Sara Scott said “Well, thank God for that.”

Offender (Norma), a program graduate who has been released from prison, filed an IRR prior to her release claiming that White is “racist,” according to an offender whom I have spoken with. The offender added “[Norma] took her IRR straight to Sara Scott (the Program Director), she was so upset.” When I suggested that (Norma) may not have made the wisest choice in bringing the IRR to Scott, “I know it’ll probably get her in more trouble,” the offender added.

A search of the Missouri Substance Professional Counseling Board confirms that a Patricia White is “credentialed” as a Recognized Substance Abuse Counselor-II, just one step up from a “RASAC-1” which requires no formal academic education.

The abuse that offenders at the Vandalia Center suffer can be easily summarized as physical groping of their body parts by a guard that was permitted by Warden Pearl to continue for at least several months to have access to women and sexually abuse six offenders, and who is still employed as a guard, despite severe emotional abuse. Guards and prison officials place offenders in a cell where they have to sleep on a hard, cold concrete floor with only a flimsy gown that barely covers an offender’s body—simply because they are suicidal or may be experiencing an emotional crisis.

Abuse in other forms include the denial of or the significant delay of medical and mental health care (at least according to Jackie Thomas’ March 22 memo), which are being totally ignored for very close to a month, the imposition of excessive extra-duty sanctions for extremely trivial rule infractions—and then guards not allowing them to complete the extra duty in a timely manner or attempting to intentionally thwart the offender’s good-faith efforts to complete the extra duty.

Denial or delay of medical and mental health care may cost Missouri taxpayers millions of dollars

Being sexually, physically and emotionally abused by guards is not the only reason

that gives offenders grounds to sue corrections officials, individual guards, and the State. Deliberate indifference to medical and mental health care is one of the most prevalent reasons why offenders sue and win Civil Rights lawsuits nationwide. Jackie Thomas' March 22 memo, and his ignoring the issue of delayed medical and mental health care has the potential to cost Missouri tax payers millions of dollars in potential damages, attorney fees and costs in defending lawsuits should an offender suffer a serious condition because of delayed medical or mental health care.

In the event that a jury trial or a case is settled and the offender/plaintiff receives just a nominal award of damages for alleged abuse, mistreatment or deliberate indifference to their medical conditions, according to the Civil Rights Act of 1983, Title 42 United States Code Section 1983, the State, effectively meaning the taxpayers of Missouri, may still have to pay the offender's substantial attorney fees if they are considered a "prevailing party," and most are if they receive any amount of damages whatsoever.

Thus, because of the on-going, uncorrected and ignored abuse of offenders at the Center, just like what happened in Michigan, Missouri taxpayers face a real risk of paying out potentially millions of dollars to resolve lawsuits that some of the victim offenders may choose to bring as a result of the ongoing abuse at the facility.

According to training that all Missouri Department of Corrections Staff receive at the "Corrections Academy", the staff has an absolute duty to protect and secure the safety of the offenders, not just at the Vandalia Center, but at every Missouri prison.

The conspiracy of silence very prevalent at the Vandalia Center

In the rare instance that a guard speaks out against the abuse, he or she is shunned by the other guards and possibly disciplined by Warden Pearl. The so-called "Blue Brotherhood" or "Conspiracy of Silence" is still very prevalent at the Vandalia Center, as it was in 2003 when officials refused Justice Department investigators entry into the prison. According to what numerous guards have told me, including Todd Paige and William Parker, officers who "drop paper" on other officers are not going to be around long and can even find themselves at risk of being assaulted. The term "dropping paper" they described is prison jargon for writing another officer up or accusing him/her of mistreating an offender, or violating a Department of Corrections Policy, even though according to the Missouri Code of Conduct as well as Department of Corrections Policy, guards who witness such mistreatment are required to report it.

Guard told by supervisor not to report emotional abuse of offenders

In mid-February, I was told by Raspberry I had better not report guard Richard Murray for forcing offenders to literally jump up against a wall when he walks by, which most have told me they see as abusive, unnecessary and literally scares most of them I have talked to. I have seen Murray scream at offenders telling them "get out of my way," while walking down a wing hallway; despite the fact three people can comfortably walk down the hallway at the same time. Raspberry added, "We all work together; you know what happens to officers (guards) who write another one up. They're convicts; f*** em" Raspberry said.

Complaints of offender abuse ignored by Warden Angela Pearl

Even when such misconduct is reported, it is mostly ignored by Pearl and other prison administrators. For example my memo about Parker and Damron advocating the shooting of inmates and Damron's wish that Offender Candice King would "drown" in the shower and his statement about (Jennifer) "maybe she would die," along with his blatant refusal to give her food, has apparently fallen on deaf ears.

Offenders at the Vandalia Center suffer daily abuse, both emotional and physical, at the hands of guards and are denied basic medical and mental health care, or it's greatly delayed, with prison administrators taking an apathetic approach to both the delay and abuse. Offenders are commonly referred to as bitches, cunts and sluts. As stated, a supervisor intentionally refused to let me feed (Jennifer), an emotionally distraught offender. Offenders are denied sanitary napkins and toilet paper and suffer other horrendous abuse, all with the knowledge or at the very least, the tacit approval of Warden Angela Pearl.

Guards who attempt to stop the abuse are often disciplined or physically threatened and their complaints have a history of being ignored by Pearl and others in authority. This is the life endured daily by offenders at the Vandalia Correctional Center, all who are also someone's mother, daughter, wife, girlfriend, sister, aunt, and so on. But most assuredly, whether or not they are guilty of the crimes they have been sentenced for, they still deserve to be treated in a humane fashion every single day of their sentence and not endure a life filled with daily abuse.

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