

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

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BY Stephen Pope

PART 2: *This is Part Two of a three-part investigative report that details the abuse of women at the Women's Eastern Reception & Diagnostic Corrections Center in Vandalia, MO. To read Part One [click here](#).*

In October of 2011, while offender Lindsey Birdsong was preparing “pasta salad,” she momentarily left her dish to obtain some additional ingredients. She said guard Susan Woodrow placed several pieces of dog food in her food. Later on, apparently realizing she had been seen contaminating Birdsong’s food by fellow offender Jenice Moore, Woodrow said “how’s your treats,” according to what Birdsong told corrections officials. For the adulteration of Birdsong’s food, Woodrow received a mere one-day suspension without pay. It is worth noting that according to interviews with her peers, Birdsong is a well-respected offender.

A sergeant with almost 15 years of service, Floyd Leach, told Pope: “I am shocked. I thought for sure she (Woodrow) would have been fired. I can’t believe she only got a one-day suspension over that.”

Birdsong wasn’t so fortunate. The next day, her room was totally “tossed” in prison parlance, meaning her possessions, food, clothes and bedding were completely “searched” and thrown all over her room by Woodrow and her friend and fellow guard Destiny Swank.

According to the Vandalia Center’s records, Birdsong was a well-behaved offender and was also a well-respected member of the center’s CHAMP dog training program, according to information I received from some of the center’s staff and offenders.

From Feb. 14, 2009 through March 4, 2010, Birdsong received only a total of five violations for breaking prison rules, however, after Woodrow contaminated her food and Birdsong complained, she received four conduct violations in as many months, the first issued by Woodrow the day after Birdsong complained about Woodrow’s contamination of her food. Yet in the 13 months prior to Woodrow’s abuse of Birdsong, she had averaged less than two violations per month.

Punished for eating potato chips

One violation, written by Woodrow’s friend Swank, was for eating a few potato chips when Birdsong was on “property impoundment,” according to Swank’s allegations written in a violation. As a result of being on room restriction for receiving a violation after she reported Woodrow’s misconduct, all of Birdsong’s food was locked in her locker.

Thus, Birdsong was living off of prison food. One of Birdsong's friends "gave me just a few potato chips to eat and Swank saw this and gave me a violation," Birdsong told me. However, Swank failed to give Birdsong's friend a violation, seemingly interested in only punishing Birdsong for eating a few potato chips.

Swank's actions in this instance were not in compliance with the "Firm, Fair and Consistent" enforcement of discipline mandated by the DOC; the other offender should have received a violation as well, which clearly shows that Housing Unit-2 guards, Swank, Jeremiah Wood and Woodrow singled out Birdsong for complaining to prison officials about Woodrow's abuse in putting dog food in her food, as shown by their conduct after Birdsong lodged her complaint.

Guards conspire to punish Birdsong for complaining about abuse

This wouldn't be the end of Birdsong's problems with the guards. Offenders are given periodic smoke breaks where they are escorted outside to smoke under a guard's supervision. According to Birdsong she simply went to the Rotunda and reminded Wood that it was time for their smoke break. Wood wrote in a Conduct Violation given to Birdsong, he took this reminder as "insulting behavior." Wood boasted to me months later "I got that bitch (Birdsong) put in the (hole) (administrative segregation) and out of the CHAMP program."

In his Conduct Violation Report, Wood didn't allege that Birdsong did anything other than approach him, asked about the smoke break which Wood in his opinion considered "insulting behavior" by Birdsong.

While I was unable to confirm Wood's allegations that he was responsible for having Birdsong placed in administrative segregation, what I did confirm was almost immediately after Birdsong's complaint about Woodrow's abusive conduct, she was issued multiple violations (some that would normally have never been issued), was placed on activity restriction, her property impounded, she was eventually placed in administrative segregation for a period of time, removed from the CHAMP program, and placed on another wing in Housing Unit-2. All occurring in a matter of a few months, in contrast to what can be considered an acceptable disciplinary record in the year prior to her complaining about Woodrow putting dog food in her meal--obviously the guards were retaliating against Birdsong's complaint about Woodrow's tainting her food, a clear case of offender abuse committed by Swank, Woodrow and Wood, yet so far having gone unpunished.

Wood is a known close friend of Woodrow and Swank.

Where doing the right thing isn't always rewarded

A stay in prison affects offenders in different ways. At times, offenders have done the right thing, so they thought, and have told staff that they wanted to harm themselves. What they get in return is placed in a flimsy kevlar gown, placed in a concrete cell, forced to sleep on a concrete floor, no mattress, no pillow, and no blanket - nothing to separate their body from the concrete.

They almost never see a mental health professional until the next day. Potentially, an offender could claim she was suicidal moments after the mental health professionals have left for the day and spend close to 18 hours in a cold concrete cell with no padding, blanket, pillow or mattress. Worse yet, if on a Friday after they left - an entire weekend!

Pope's research shows for a very economical price, the Department could easily provide the offenders with a tear-proof mattress or sleeping bag, at least according to a check on several websites by Pope.

One released offender, Stacey Lannert who was placed in a concrete cell with such a gown and nothing else wrote in a book entitled "*Redemption: A Story of Sisterhood, Survival, and Finding Freedom Behind Bars*" about her experiences partially at the Vandalia Center; "Down in a small single room all they would give me was a paper gown. I froze my ass off with no mattress and hardly any food. In the middle of the night a kind officer gave me an extra paper gown to cover up with. But the next morning, the next shift officer took it away from me. When she did, I asked if she wanted my blood too because those were the only things keeping me warm."

Countless times while working in Housing Unit-5A where suicidal or emotionally disturbed offenders are housed, I have seen these distraught offenders pleading, in fact begging to talk to a mental health professional, only for Sergeants Darrell Damron and Danel Hawkins, along with guards Linda Edwards and Brittany Durlin to simply turn off the intercom and joke about the offender; making no effort in the least to determine what the offenders' issue is.

On Jan. 22 I brought to the attention of my supervisor, Sergeant Brian Thomas, that Sgt. Damron and guard William Parker were both advocating the mass shooting of women whom they commonly and without any compunction at all, referred to as "bitches," numerous times during their conversation. Also included in the memo was Damron's statement that he "didn't care if offender Candice King drowned in the shower" in response to a comment made that she usually takes a few minutes longer than the allotted time to shower.

Nothing even remotely resembling compassion

Thomas, after reading the memo said "this is serious stuff, I gave it to the Shift Commander." According to information I received from Thomas, my memo was summarily disregarded.

Damron's wishes to mass-execute offenders is not the only time his apparent hatred for offenders or his complete lack of anything close to compassion has been displayed for the offenders who may be going through an emotional crisis.

On January 21, I was filling in on Housing Unit-5A for a guard who was going to be late. I asked offender (Jennifer) if she wanted a food tray. Knowing (Jennifer) suffers from emotional issues and appeared upset, it didn't surprise me that she would initially refuse. I spoke to (Jennifer), encouraging her to try and eat something from her tray, and telling her it may make her feel better, which she finally agreed to. At the time I didn't know just mere moments before Damron had already asked (Jennifer) if she wanted a food tray and

she refused. When I attempted to bring her a tray, Damron said “the bitch refused; that’s it.” I told Damron that she had refused mere moments before and she wasn’t feeling good, and Damron replied “I don’t give a f***, maybe she will die, do not give her anything.”

That day three full trays of food were returned to Food Service and thrown away, one of them belonging to (Jennifer). On that same day I witnessed Parker emotionally abuse offender (Melodie), who then was on Housing Unit-5A as a member of the Women’s Social Rehabilitation Unit, a program designed to help women with special needs adapt to prison life. Melodie asked Parker for her cigarettes, and Melodie alleged in her complaint (called an “Informal Resolution Request” or IRR) against Parker, that Parker told her he could not find them. Parker didn’t find them because he only looked for a few seconds, but they were in the drawer where they are usually kept.

(Melody) accused Parker in her IRR: “I was in my cell & he came on the box (intercom) and said your baby is better off not having a mom that’s in prison, you stupid little bitch. He said, “Good luck finding someone that will believe I (Parker) said that.” I heard Parker say these disturbing comments to (Melodie).

Among other disturbing incidents include Wood’s personal quest to “pepper spray as many of these bitches (offenders) as I can.” Wood, who has only been a guard for a little over nine months has boasted about spraying three women, when most guards spend years never spraying not even one.

At least one guard, Donald Aimes was disturbed by Wood’s conduct, after he heard Wood tell him “I want to pepper spray as many of these bitches as I can.” Shortly after Wood left the Rotunda area, to perform a security check of one of the housing unit wings, Aimes, said “You know, even though he is a young kid, he can be dangerous. I don’t agree with the way he does things, and I am not sure if he should be working here.” Disturbingly, Wood has told numerous guards he is being considered for employment as an Alaskan State Trooper.

Guard verbalizes wish for violence

In March, Wood became aware that an extraction team was being assembled, apparently because a woman was refusing to comply with guards’ instructions. In the presence of Brian Thomas and myself, Wood (despite being told several times that according to the Vandalia Center’s policy, and barring an emergency, all extraction team members have to be females) requested numerous times to be part of that team, saying “I would just love to go in and slam a bitch on the floor.”

Guards are supposed to conduct two room searches per each eight-hour-shift. Each of the three shifts have a “Search Book” or “Search Log” where guards are required to randomly select two rooms from the “Search Book” that have not been searched, search them, and then note the results of the searches in the “Search Book”, to ensure that rooms are not typically searched more than once a month.

Another example of Wood’s harassment and abuse of offenders: One day in March I heard Wood tell Aimes he was going to find two rooms “where the most women are sleeping, resting or watching TV so I can kick ’em out,” meaning Wood’s intent was to

disrupt their activities, intentionally inconveniencing them, because during a room search, all offenders are required to be out of the room being searched. Apparently Wood likes his guard job so much he told me “I’m glad I gave up smoking pot so I could get this job; it’s so much fun.”

In early March, I witnessed offender (Tammy) ask repeatedly to be let out of her wing so she could go to recreation. Wood was responsible for opening the doors at the time and knew (Tammy) had only ten minutes to get to the gym before the “movement window” is closed or she would not be allowed to go recreation that night. For about five minutes I watched as Wood repeatedly taunted (Tammy) saying “give me the password...what is the magic word....what is the password?” Wood smiled when he saw that (Tammy) was becoming more agitated by the minute. After all, she just wanted to go work out in the gym.

Upset and correctly thinking that Wood, despite not having a good reason, had no intention of opening the door for Tammy; she simply walked away. She would later describe to me how disgusted she felt about Wood’s refusal to open the door. Wood said “the f***ing bitch can’t take a joke; she is going nowhere.”

The abuse of offenders isn’t isolated to the few guards already discussed; it appears widespread, as documented in a March 19 memo to all staff members from Deputy Warden Cybil Salzman, when she said “It has come to my attention some staff who benefit from Cosmetology services at VoTech treat offenders in a disrespectful and sometimes demeaning manner.”

If this guard had his way

The hatred of offenders by a supervisor was shown during the first week of March when Hawkins told me, “These women are nothing more than f***ing convicts and in my opinion they are treated way too soft. If I had my way they would eat only one meal a day and work most of the day. There would be no rec (recreation) or gym. These bitches are useless pieces of shit.”

It is not uncommon at all for me to have witnessed Hawkins call offender April who is permanently assigned to Housing Unit-5A for a variety of reasons a “f***ing bitch” and one time when she was experiencing a severe emotional crisis, threatened to pepper spray her just because she was crying.

As of the end of March, Hawkins was under official investigation for excessive use of force against an offender who had already been handcuffed and placed in a cell when he pushed her against a concrete wall. Hawkins admitted to me several times he intentionally pushed the handcuffed offender into the wall.

Guards violating DOC and facility policies when disciplining offenders

During my year at the Vandalia Center, I witnessed numerous instances of guards screaming at offenders for no reason and other abuses. On several occasions, Aimes would catch offenders wearing their state-issued shower shoes in the dayroom late into his shift. Despite Department and the Vandalia Center policies that clearly state room restrictions

are to be given for the duration of the issuing guard's shift on the day the violation occurs, and Aimes, Wood, Geary, Norman Graham and others knowing these policies, each have given offenders room restriction the following day, in violation of these policies in order to punish the offenders for a full eight hours. When I asked Aimes and Graham (a supervisor) about the legitimacy of the punishment, Graham said "listen, Pope, who cares about these cunts, if they don't complain don't concern yourself with it."

Is one guard a possible Peeping Tom? According to offender (Alice), guard Timothy Geary walked into a bathroom one day filled with women and "stood around while offenders were in the stalls, just staring at the stalls while the girls were trying to go the bathroom." I asked [Alice] if she believed Geary could see inside the stalls and [Alice] said "Ah, yeah, look for yourself when nobody is in them." I did just that and clearly the opening in the stalls was sufficient to see an unclothed person using the toilet.

Also according to (Alice) on one occasion she saw Geary put offenders' mail down the front of his pants just prior to passing it out to them. Other offenders have told me on several occasions Wood has done the same thing with their (offenders) mail before giving it to them.

Facility Supervisor has history of abusive conduct towards offenders

According to offender (Janet), Lt. Roland Raspberry told her "Listen, bitch if you don't shut up, I will empty my can of pepper spray in your mouth and all you will be able to do is vomit, cry and spit up." This would be considered even under the most restrictive views as offender abuse.

Raspberry abused another offender in February, according to offender (Lisa), Raspberry asked her "what my charges are"? He also said, "Do you have any kids?" When (Lisa) told him "no," Raspberry said "Are you infertile or does your man not want your drunk ass?" (Lisa) added. This encounter, according to (Lisa), was witnessed by a guard and another offender. After what (Lisa) told me, I conducted an inquiry and confirmed that (Lisa's) account of what Raspberry said to her is accurate.

One day during the first week of April, according to a discussion I had with offender (Susan) who has since been released after completing the Gateway Treatment Program, Raspberry was again abusive to a group of women; this time in the dining hall. (Susan) was housed on "D" Wing of Housing Unit-1. "That Wing always is always the last to go to eat," (Susan) said. "We had just gotten our food and sat down, and Mr. Raspberry said "How are you ladies doing?" and when we said fine, he said "Eat your f***** shit and get the f*** out." We were only able to gobble down just half our tray before Mr. Raspberry ran us out of there," (Susan) added.

Guards are not even above falsifying information to punish offenders or separate those they believe are good friends. In late February, I heard Sgt. Daniel Wombles tell Wood "We need to do whatever it takes to separate them two," referring to two offenders who had become good friends.

In the conclusion of this three-part series, I continue to document the verbal and

emotional abuse of the women. You will read about the wasting of food by guards and staff while offenders go hungry, offenders given extra-duty as punishment and then intentionally not being allowed to complete it, the denial of the most basic hygiene items such as toilet paper and sanitary napkins, and other forms of abuse. Part three also includes allegations of abuse by employees of the Gateway Residential Treatment Program.

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