

LEWISBURG PRISON PROJECT

2021 ANNUAL NEWSLETTER



"THERE IS NO POWER FOR CHANGE GREATER THAN A COMMUNITY DISCOVERING WHAT IT CARES ABOUT."

- MARGARET WHEATLEY

President's Message

A warm hello to you all. In the following pages, you will see what the LPP community cares about. Please enjoy the following pages that highlight our accomplishments, introduce new faces, and provide information. For example, this year we have hired a new attorney and added two new board members. Office staff returned to a more in-person work environment, allowing us to receive the help of a new volunteer, too. I am excited for you to meet these committed folks.

First, we offer an overview of what our LPP office staff hear from clients on a day-to-day basis. Our paralegals highlight some of the most common civil rights issues that incarcerated people have written about over the past year. You can also read more about each of these civil rights issues by visiting our website resource section which features our legal bulletins.

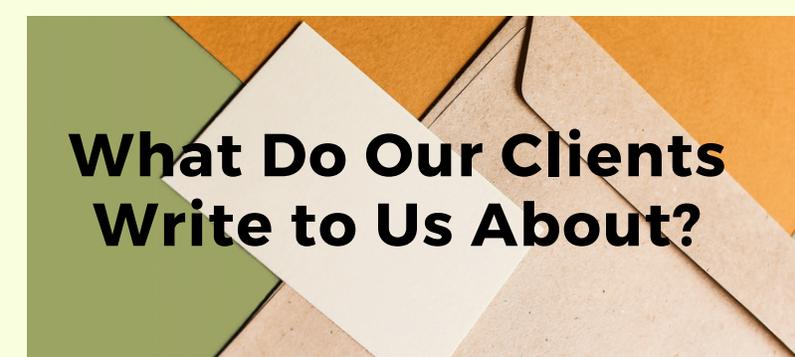
Last year, we informed you of the IOLTA grant that our affiliate, [Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project](#) (PILP), received that funds our collective work assisting incarcerated women and LGBTQ+ people with their civil and constitutional rights. This year, the project led

us to investigate access to medical and mental health care at SCI Muncy (one of two state prisons for women). As a response to what we heard, we wrote advocacy letters on behalf of three clients who are incarcerated there.

Additionally - and fortunately - Sebastian Richardson, whom we introduced you to through NPR and The Marshall Project's piece, [28 Days in Chains](#), completed his sentence this year and returned to his community. Mr. Richardson embodies humanity, despite the lack of humanity he endured.

We are so thankful that you are a part of this community where we support and fight for the civil rights of people who are incarcerated. Your generosity is so appreciated. Though we continue to rely on the financial support many of you provide, this upcoming year we also need your time. The LPP board is recruiting people who have six hours a year to give to help out with a new project. If it sparks your interest, please reach out to me. I would love to talk with you about advocacy work with which you can engage. Thank you all again for your ongoing support of our work!

Angela Trop, LPP Board President



What Do Our Clients Write to Us About?

At the Lewisburg Prison Project, we receive hundreds of letters and calls from people who are incarcerated in county jails, state prisons, and federal penitentiaries. You may wonder what's in all of these letters and what types of issues we hear about most frequently. Below are some of the major issues that people have written to us about over the past year. The issues raised in these letters highlight the challenges that are faced by those on the inside and the types of issues our staff respond to and provide information about on a daily basis to our clients.

Medical & Mental Health Care

Lack of access to adequate medical care is one of the most frequent issues that we hear. Incarcerated people have a constitutional right to receive medical care, yet for many it is a constant struggle to receive it. Many people who are incarcerated have chronic medical conditions that require routine medications, monitoring, and specific medical care. There can also be significant delays in provision of care.

Many people confined in prison and jails also suffer from mental health conditions. Just as finding mental health care on the outside can be difficult and time-consuming, getting adequate counseling, medication, or other treatment can be a long and painful process for people who are incarcerated.

Unfortunately, in many circumstances, symptoms of mental illnesses are ascribed to “behavioral issues” and punished rather than treated. Further, incarcerated people do not have access to many of the informal self-care methods suggested for mental well-being on the outside, such as going for walks in nature, using a meditation app, snuggling a pet, or taking a vacation.

Our following section on medical and mental health care at SCI Muncy elaborates in more detail the specific struggles that some of our clients have experienced.

Solitary Confinement

Solitary confinement generally means that a person is locked alone in their cell between 22-24 hours a day. They may only leave their cell to take a shower, use the phone, or go to the yard for a brief recreation time. However, in most circumstances, a person living in solitary confinement has limited ability to use the phone, go out to yard, or regularly meaningfully interact with other people. In addition, other privileges such as commissary access and access to personal property such as books, magazines, music, or writing materials are limited, as well. As a result, people are left in a small cell with very little to occupy their time.

Solitary units are often referred to as “the hole” and can be called a Special Housing Unit (SHU), Restricted Housing Unit (RHU), or something similar. These high security units have strict rules and regulations. For example, in these units, incarcerated people have to be in restraints at all times while outside of their cell. There may also be lights on all the time, making it difficult to sleep.

There are various circumstances or situations where a person may be housed in solitary confinement while they are incarcerated, but usually these reasons fall into two categories: disciplinary custody and administrative custody. Disciplinary custody is punishment and follows after a person is found guilty of a disciplinary misconduct. Administrative custody is for non-disciplinary confinement. This includes placement prior to a transfer to a different facility, placement pending an investigation, or placement in protective custody, when a person is separated from the general population to ensure their safety.

Spending even a short amount of time in solitary confinement conditions can impact the mental and physical health of those who experience it. The isolation, sensory deprivation, and harsh conditions can cause issues with sleep, anxiety, depression, erratic emotions, auditory and visual hallucinations, and more. As a result of these documented impacts of solitary confinement, it has become widely recognized as a form of torture.

Unfortunately, solitary confinement is utilized on a regular basis in institutions in Pennsylvania, with individuals living under these severe conditions from a few days or weeks, to several months or years, and even to multiple decades.

Harassment & Retaliation

In most ways, incarcerated people are at the mercy of the officers who run the prisons day-to-day. Unfortunately, this means that when issues arise between prison staff and incarcerated people, staff can engage in harassment and retaliation against incarcerated people. Our

clients report to us that prison staff make racist, sexist, homophobic, and other derogatory comments towards them and interfere with their phone calls, visits, and mail. Additionally, advocating for your rights while incarcerated can put you at risk for retaliation by staff. Requesting assistance, writing grievances, speaking with advocates, and filing lawsuits can all result in retaliation by staff. Retaliation can make it both difficult and intimidating to try to remedy an issue while in prison.

COVID-19

Prisons and jails are greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. For incarcerated people, COVID-19 caused both severe restrictions of their privileges and an increase in their risk of illness and death. In 2020, many prisons and jails went into lockdown for months on end, leaving incarcerated people confined to their cell most of the day.

Our staff constantly monitored the conditions in prison and jails during COVID-19, sending out questionnaires and collecting reports about the mitigation procedures and responses of institutions.

This year, as vaccines became available and new COVID-19 variants emerged, some restrictions decreased. However, this summer the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PA DOC) created units at each institution to house incarcerated people who chose not to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. While there are greater restrictions in these units, incarcerated people in these unvaccinated units should still have access to necessary services and live in safe and clean environments.

Medical and Mental Health Care at SCI Muncy

Access to adequate medical care while incarcerated is a constitutional right. Yet far too many incarcerated people are denied this right and must struggle with lack of access to essential medical care. Through correspondence, LPP staff became aware of egregious violations at SCI Muncy, a large state prison for women. As a result, attorneys from the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project have now filed three advocacy letters on behalf of women incarcerated there.

Two of these cases involve diabetes. One woman was diagnosed with diabetes upon intake at SCI Muncy in 2011 but not informed of this diagnosis nor given insulin until she was hospitalized in 2013. Since that time, she has struggled with infections in her legs and painful neuropathy. She was again taken off insulin in 2017 and only this year provided again with medication to control her glucose levels. She is in severe pain, limiting her ability to sleep or walk. These issues are medically treatable, yet SCI Muncy staff continue to fail to provide comprehensive treatment for her neuropathy, ulcers, and subsequent pain, in some cases even failing to follow the recommendations of their own medical staff. This woman has been warned that if her situation does not improve, she risks kidney failure and leg amputation.

A second woman has had difficulty controlling her diabetes since being incarcerated at SCI Muncy. Her A1c tests, which measure the blood glucose level over the past three months, have been rising alarmingly in the past year. She is experiencing all the common symptoms of hyperglycemia and was recommended by a staff

doctor to see an endocrinologist for treatment, but this consultation was not approved. This woman has no means to check her blood sugar levels apart from the twice-daily blood sugar tests when she receives her insulin. She has no access to a diabetic diet and is often fed carbohydrate-rich meals based on potatoes or pasta. She has been recommended for a foot clinic on multiple occasions, but has never been seen.

A third case involves mental health. This woman has experienced traumatic abuse throughout her life and has been institutionalized in psychiatric hospitals since the age of 13. She has been diagnosed and treated for multiple psychological conditions, but medical staff at SCI Muncy provided her with only two psychiatric diagnoses: Antisocial Personality Disorder in March 2019 and PTSD in September 2019. They then removed the PTSD diagnosis in September 2020. In spite of multiple attempts at suicide and self-harm, she has not been placed in the Mental Health Unit. On at least one occasion after she self-harmed, she was placed in a restraint chair for 72 hours immediately upon returning from the hospital, triggering her PTSD associated with a violent sexual trauma. Despite her serious mental health needs, she does not have meaningful access to either a therapist or a psychiatrist, and has received inadequate psychiatric medication.

In their advocacy letters, PILP attorneys have asked SCI Muncy to address the medical needs of these women. You can read these advocacy letters yourself by visiting the [LPP](#) or [PILP websites](#).

Sebastian Richardson's Release

Notes from an Interview

by LPP Board Member Jennifer Thomson

Sebastian Richardson, released in late summer 2021 after twenty seven years of federal incarceration, has returned to his hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana. Mr. Richardson generously agreed to an interview with me in early November to talk about what his life looks like now. After spending years in solitary confinement, he described his release from prison as a true sensory overload, and noted that he is still dealing with trust issues generated by what he experienced while he was incarcerated, particularly at USP Lewisburg.

Mr. Richardson's commitment to giving back to his community in Shreveport is profound. He has been helping children by putting together anti-violence programs. He also distributes sandwiches, water, coats and hand warmers on a near-daily basis to the poor and unhoused populations downtown. He described this work as the biggest part of his transition to life outside bars. As he put it, helping people helps him to remember how important it is to forgive; it is a form of therapy for him, so he doesn't dwell upon what he went through.

Unfortunately, Mr. Richardson is still struggling to find work. One issue is that the available transition programs don't do much more than provide information about possible avenues of employment. Another issue is that the enduring injuries from his time at the SMU seriously limit what he's able to do. In 2011, while at USP Lewisburg, Mr. Richardson was restrained for several weeks after refusing to be double-celled with a potentially violent individual.



Mr. Sebastian Richardson, 2021

For the time being, Mr. Richardson is focusing his energy in a positive direction: passing out candy to children for Halloween, helping the homeless, and making videos and reaching out to children about violence. In the near future he hopes to have a house and be financially secure.

Throughout our conversation I was awed by the depth of his compassion and integrity. In reflecting on his time at USP Lewisburg, Mr. Richardson commented that he hopes institutional changes occur so that others don't suffer the same injustices. Former LPP paralegal Dave Sprout, has stayed in near-daily communication with Mr. Richardson, and shared that he is the most honest person he's ever known.

Mr. Richardson's damages case is still pending in federal court. For more information about the conditions in the former SMU at USP Lewisburg, you can read the Marshall Project's report "[28 Days in Chains](#)."

Welcome New Staff Attorney Sue Rogers

LPP is thrilled to welcome Sue Rogers as staff attorney. Hired in October by LPP's affiliate organization, the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Office (PILP), Sue graduated from the University of Denver Sturm College of Law in May 2021.

While a law student, Sue served in the Student Law Office's Civil Rights Clinic, where she gained experience by representing a formerly incarcerated person in a Bivens case and drafting an amicus brief for a case involving an incarcerated trans woman. She also held internships at the Colorado State Public Defender's Office, where she drafted motions for felony and misdemeanor cases, analyzed forensic evidence, and performed various types of research.

Sue's passion for working in the field began when she was a junior anthropology major at the University of Texas. She volunteered with the Inside Books Project, a books-to-prisoners program that received about a thousand letters a month from incarcerated people. The volunteers responded by sending books and "receipts" – actual personal letters -- to each incarcerated person who wrote to them.

This work, and Sue's familiarity with the struggles faced by lower-income neighbors in the working-class neighborhoods where she grew up, inspired her to apply to law school. Her experience in the Law School Clinic confirmed for her that she wanted to focus her career on working for the civil rights of incarcerated people, whose needs and rights are so often overlooked.



The staff attorney position at PILP/LPP appealed to Sue because the job will allow her to focus on civil rights and advocacy for incarcerated people. In addition, her work in the University of Denver Civil Rights Clinic, which involved addressing the lack of medical care provided to incarcerated people and advocating for transgender rights, has prepared her well for her new role with PILP/LPP. Having grown up in Colorado and Texas, she loves the outdoors and was delighted to learn of the many miles of trails available to be explored in Central Pennsylvania.

Sue's experience, education, and commitment to civil rights augur well for PILP, LPP and, most importantly, for the incarcerated people she will be serving.

We're glad to have you, Sue!

Welcome Office Volunteer Heather Haynos



Heather joined the LPP office in August to assist with sending out legal bulletins, fact sheets, prison policies, case law, handbooks, and manuals to people who are incarcerated in prisons and jails throughout the country.

Heather's professional background includes Spanish language instruction and bilingual support in local public schools as well as in the community. She is an invaluable resource and, after a year and half without office volunteers to help us due to the pandemic, we are so lucky to have her volunteering with us!

Welcome New LPP Board Members

We realized that we rarely include the names of the LPP Board of Directors. Possibly, you know some of these amazing people. Our current board members are Steven Becker, Marty Ligare, Ben Vollmayr-Lee, Angela Trop, Vanessa Massaro, Alex Skitolksi, Jennifer Thomson, and Deirdre O' Connor. And this year, we added two board members: Erica Delsandro and Laura Lanwermyer.

Laura Lanwermyer is the Teaching and Learning Center Associate Director at Bucknell University. She is a natural leader; LPP hopes to take advantage of her skills to build our volunteer base and increase membership.



Erica Delsandro is an Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Bucknell University. Erica is eager to help LPP with outreach and community education. All of us are eager to answer any questions you may have about LPP's mission and goals.

Lewisburg Prison Project
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Lewisburg Prison Project Mission

The Lewisburg Prison Project, Inc. is a non-profit organization that provides advocacy, information, and legal assistance to people incarcerated in Pennsylvania regarding their conditions of confinement. We also provide incarcerated people across the United States with information and legal bulletins regarding conditions of confinement.

We are dedicated to the principle that incarcerated people have incontestable human and constitutional rights.



*Thank
you!*