

2023 ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

LEWISBURG PRISON PROJECT



“IF YOU DON’T KNOW WHERE YOU’VE COME FROM,
YOU CAN’T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE GOING” -
MAYA ANGELOU

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE - Angela Trop

The LPP celebrated our 50th year well throughout 2023. Collecting our oral histories and meeting as a board to discuss our future have been rewarding, difficult, and necessary. As a result, we feel more connected to our foundation, which is solidly grassroots activism.

In our strategic planning for the next 50 years, we found ourselves reestablishing LPP’s original goals:

1. Provide accessible prisoner civil rights education to federal penitentiary inmates.
2. Keep citizens aware of what is happening in incarcerated spaces.
3. Advocate for change when civil rights abuses occur.

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE (continued)

This newsletter marks the start of our return to our roots. You will read an inspiring excerpt from an oral history project, as well as a disturbing report of the torture that happened within the Special Management Unit of our federal Bureau of Prisons. You will see a positive update regarding educational materials for federal inmates and read about some of the important topics and issues Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project (PILP) staff are working on.

For 30 years, we have collaborated contractually with PILP. Our direct focus on conditions of confinement has made the partnership work; however, the LPP wants to return to a more locally-driven organization. I say with confidence that PILP is a healthy organization that responds to the needs of every inmate letter in the state of Pennsylvania; I believe both organizations have grown, and together we have improved the lives of incarcerated individuals and at times improved the prison system. While we will not be working in a shared space anymore, our missions will continue in solidarity and mutuality. Furthermore, the LPP will collaborate with all community organizations that share common goals. In order to achieve these goals, we are sharing with you a call for resumes on page 9. The LPP hopes to hire a part-time coordinator who believes in our mission. Whether you are a future coordinator, a helpful volunteer, or a generous donor, thank you.

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2023

LEGAL BULLETINS UPDATE

- Ben Vollmayr-Lee

In our 2022 Newsletter we wrote about our goal of updating our legal bulletins. We are happy to report progress on that front. First, to recap, these legal bulletins are a set of 18 documents that provide information to inmates and their families on a variety of topics, such as how to litigate a civil case, how to get started on legal research, and how to apply for injunctive relief. Additional bulletins provide information about medical, psychiatric, and disability rights, and much more.

The bulletins are typically five to eight pages long and written in straightforward language intended to be understandable to the general reader and not presuming legal training. Inmates and families can request paper copies or download them from the LPP website. Historically, these resources have been heavily used, with LPP distributing close to a thousand copies annually within Pennsylvania and nationally.

Unfortunately, most of LPP's legal bulletins have not been updated since 2005, which means the precedent-setting cases described in them may have since been affected or overturned by recent court decisions. Also, the range of topics is dated, since issues such as COVID-19 and opioid-use disorder have emerged relatively recently. As such, we have made updating the bulletins a top priority for the near future.



On that front we are happy to report that Philadelphia-based attorney Jennifer Tobin has agreed to take on the task of updating the bulletins. Attorney Tobin has a long history with LPP, having provided us with excellent legal support over the years and taken on important cases, such as the successful class-action lawsuit against the Northumberland County Prison. We are very pleased to be working with her again on this endeavor!

This bulletin update would more accurately be described as an overhaul, since some of the bulletin topics are now obsolete, and other topics may well be consolidated so that we will likely end up with fewer total bulletins. We are also discussing the possibility of creating a set of one-to-two page fact sheets. We currently provide ACLU Fact Sheets, but these, too, are out of date.

As we plan our future in this time of transition away from our partnership with PILP, providing accurate and current legal bulletins will be one of our core functions as an organization. We appreciate your assistance in helping us reach this goal.

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LPP's 50th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

- Deirdre O'Connor

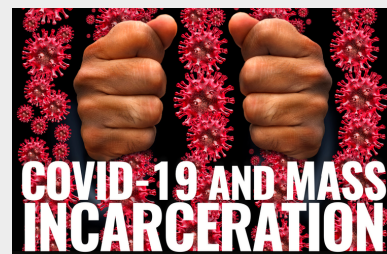
On April 15, 2023, LPP celebrated its 50th anniversary at the Bull Run Taphouse in Lewisburg, PA. LPP Board President, Angela Trop, welcomed and thanked community members for their ongoing support of LPP. Attorney Su Ming Yeh, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project (PILP), spoke of the historic LPP-PILP partnership. Kendall Robertson, Bucknell '23, LPP's Oral History Coordinator, spoke about her experience researching her senior thesis, "The Nightmare of the Special Management Unit at Lewisburg Penitentiary: Inmate Mistreatment and the Importance of Empathy," and shared highlights of what she had learned from interviewing staff, board members, and others associated with LPP. The anniversary celebration also included visual displays that summarized LPP activities and accomplishments by decade, including efforts on behalf of Mariel Boatlift Cuban refugees in the 1980s and advocacy on behalf of inmates subjected to violence in Lewisburg's Special Management Unit.

LPP's Isabelle and Karl Patten Award was given to partners Penn Garvin and Doug Orbaker. The Patten Award is given to deserving community activists who embody the spirit of LPP founders Isabelle and Karl in the pursuit of social justice in the Susquehanna Valley. Penn and Doug have each contributed to projects locally and well beyond the Susquehanna Valley.



Penn is a longtime activist whose local work included training and organizing for the HUB for Progress and the newly formed Rural Organizing Center (ROC). Doug is a Presbyterian minister advocating for inclusivity who has worked in various communities to raise awareness about racial hate and promote antiracism. The anniversary celebration attracted many of LPP's longtime supporters, as well as members of the Tri-County NAACP, the ROC, and Lewisburg's Community Zone.

LPP's 50th anniversary celebration was preceded by an April 13th roundtable discussion on COVID-19 and mass incarceration held in the Bucknell Humanities Center. Attendees learned how the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect life in prison. Panel participants included attorneys, a reorientation coordinator, formerly incarcerated persons, and LPP-PILP paralegal Sierra Shamer. The panel discussion was well attended, particularly by local community members and Bucknell students.



Friends of LPP may know that Kendall Robertson, Bucknell '23, wrote her senior history paper on the SMU, and LPP's role in publicizing the abuses that transpired. Below are excerpts from Kendall's paper. Readers curious to read the entire paper are encouraged to contact board member Jennifer Thomson.

The Nightmare of the Special Management Unit at Lewisburg Penitentiary: Inmate Mistreatment and the Importance of Empathy - Kendall Robertson

Much of the effort, the information, and the victories against the BOP...are because of the Lewisburg Prison Project (LPP). LPP fights for the humane treatment of inmates while they are in prison. As board member Ben Vollmayr-Lee put it, "[LPP is] there for guilty... even when they are [guilty], they are still human." LPP is a reminder that the mistreatment, and often torture, that occurs at USP Lewisburg will not go unnoticed or unreported. Another board member, Paul Susman, noted how "Over the years, the very presence of LPP and letting the warden and letting people know we were watching, sometimes just in and of itself led to improvements." LPP regularly had and has paralegals or volunteers visiting the penitentiary when possible. By seeing inmates regularly, LPP members were able to keep track of inmates' well-being. Especially if they were victims of physical violence, LPP would remind USP Lewisburg that they were keeping an eye on these inmates. One of the best practices of LPP is their letter writing and receiving process. LPP allows inmates to write to the organization about concerns that they may have.

Or, as Angela Trop, another LPP member, describes, inmates simply write just to know someone is out there listening to them. LPP has a policy of answering each and every letter to remind inmates that their feelings and thoughts are valid, even if they are inside prison walls. Angela noted that "Just listening completely changes them." She went on to say how the root of LPP as an organization is "validating that they are in a rough spot and having someone listen and make them visible. It makes being in prison not so unbearable." LPP's mission reminds society how important empathy is, no matter the situation an individual is in.

The Special Management Unit at USP Lewisburg is only one of the countless examples of mistreatment and torture within the walls of BOP institutions. A paper of this kind cannot do justice to the entire history of USP Lewisburg. Outside of the SMU unit, there were and are countless instances of violence, mistreatment, and discrimination. However, the SMU speaks volumes about the appalling treatment inmates were and are subjected to. It represents some of the darkest parts of incarceration in the United States. More specifically, the SMU unit at Lewisburg demonstrates the stripping of humanity, by society and the BOP, the second an inmate enters the prison doors. This is why organizations like the Lewisburg Prison Project are so important. LPP...serves as a reminder that just because a person is incarcerated does not mean they do not deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Or as LPP board member Elayne Sobel put it, "Just because they are serving time does not mean they have to be treated like animals."

1. Ben Vollmayr-Lee, interview by author, Lewisburg, February 28, 2023.
2. Paul Susman, interview by author, conducted on Zoom, November 14, 2022.
3. Angela Trop, interview by author, conducted on Zoom, September 27, 2022.
4. Elayne Sobel, interview by author, conducted on Zoom, December 8, 2022.

PILP Receives Grant for Assistance on Medical and Disability Issues

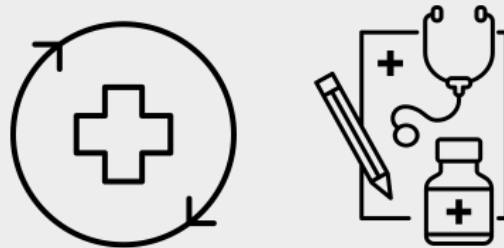
- Marty Ligare

The Pennsylvania Interest on Lawyers Trust Account Board (IOLTA) awards grants "that support the provision of free legal assistance to low-income Pennsylvanians in civil matters where a basic human need, such as access to shelter, nutrition, or healthcare, is at stake." The Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project (PILP) received a \$75,000 grant (renewable for up to three years) to increase the Project's ability to focus on medical care and disability issues in state and county jails in northeastern Pennsylvania. This includes both reactive and proactive measures. The funding helps provide the support necessary to maintain the PILP Lewisburg staff (attorney Evageline Wright and paralegals Stina Stannik and Sierra Shamer).

Inmates have the right to basic medical care (but not the care of their choice). They are also under the purview of the Americans With Disabilities ACT (ADA). The Project receives more letters than it can handle about issues like cancer care, treatment for diabetes, and disabilities such as hearing impairment. The Project can respond with information and advice, and in more egregious cases the response may take the form of an advocacy letter on behalf of an inmate, or even litigation.

One of the largest areas of concern is Opioid Use Disorder (OUD), and access to drugs such as Suboxone which reduce the alarming mortality from OUD both in prisons and shortly after release of inmates. The Pennsylvania Department of Correction does offer treatment, but only to those who have a record of pre-existing medical treatment plans and community prescriptions prior to incarceration. The situation in county jails is an uneven patchwork, with some having no policy about OUD treatment. PILP is filing right-to-know requests with counties in order to fill in the picture, and find out where the biggest problems lie.

The IOLTA grant also has a proactive focus on getting information into local communities so that inmates with known medical conditions like OUD and their families can be well-informed in a timely manner on medical rights, OUD treatment, and the resources that are available to help. This is especially important in county facilities with their higher turnover rates. PILP envisions partnerships with public defenders offices, legal services offices, and public libraries to help disseminate information.



Additional information on OUD and PA jails can be found at:

<https://pilp.org/news/2022/7/7/new-report-finds-overwhelming-majority-of-pennsylvania-jails-provide-inadequate-care-for-opioid-use-disorder>

“Cruel and Usual”: Investigation into Abuses at USP Thomson

- Dave Sprout & Jennifer Thomson

As friends of LPP likely remember, in December 2018 the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) closed the Special Management Unit (SMU) located at USP Lewisburg. While located in Lewisburg, the SMU was an inhumane program that used double celling, assaults, denial of access to mental and medical healthcare, and obstruction of inmates’ access to legal counsel and the BOP grievance process. As LPP board member Marty Ligare observed in the 2019 newsletter, “In practice, SMU inmates experience a life of isolation and violence.”

The SMU was reopened several months later at USP Thomson in Thomson, Illinois. Many guards from Lewisburg’s SMU helped to train Thomson’s guards, and some Lewisburg guards even relocated to Thomson. In February 2023, just four years after opening the SMU at Thomson, the BOP closed the facility in response to investigation and pending litigation, and redistributed SMU inmates throughout the BOP system. Troublingly, Thomson guards were also redistributed amongst BOP facilities, in three documented cases traveling with SMU inmates.

“Cruel and Usual: An Investigation into Prison Abuse at USP Thomson,” a recent report from the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs, the Uptown People’s Law Center, Levy Firestone Muse LLP, and Latham & Watkins LLP, details the horrific practices used by guards who were transported to Thomson from USP Lewisburg. Using interviews with more than 120 inmates, the report documents the regular use of four-point restraints and restraint chairs, often for days on end; extended solitary confinement; forced celling (putting together two inmates the staff knew would induce violent behavior between the two); racist slurs; and “active interference” with inmates’ ability to have access to their attorneys as well as the BOP grievance process. Many SMU inmates were held for much longer than the stated 9-12 month duration of the SMU program, in some cases, for nearly four years.

This “culture of torture” was perpetrated by more than 165 staff at all levels of the chain of command at Thomson. As the report contends, the conditions of confinement were even more unconstitutional than at USP Lewisburg. What is most troubling to LPP is that this is not, and has never been “the story of a rogue facility.” The culture of torture that made national news at USP Lewisburg, and intensified at USP Thomson, reflects the broader set of approved practices within the BOP. And it’s not only a problem at SMU’s.

“Cruel and Usual” (continued)

Inmates in federal prisons throughout the country report the use of excessive restraints, assaults, forced celling, lack of access to the grievance process, and denial of mental health and medical care.

LPP concurs with the report’s five recommendations:

- DOJ should immediately investigate abuses at the SMU
- BOP must end the SMU program and limit the use of restrictive housing
- BOP must limit and monitor the use of restraints
- BOP must create a meaningful and accessible grievance process
- DOJ must impose external independent oversight.

During the time that the SMU was at USP Lewisburg, 2009 to 2018, LPP staff worked diligently to try and assist the men who were being subjected to abusive and unconstitutional conditions. LPP also worked to try and get the word out to other prisoners' rights organizations, elected officials and the news media about the inhumane conditions at USP Lewisburg.

A 2016 investigation by the Marshall Project and NPR brought national attention to the inhumane conditions at USP Lewisburg. Then in November of 2016, after the Marshall Project/NPR report came out, a letter signed by 37 civil rights, human rights and church groups was sent to U.S. Attorney General Lynch asking the Department of Justice to investigate the harrowing allegations of abuse and torture of prisoners in the SMU at USP Lewisburg.

Hopefully with the closing of the SMU at USP Lewisburg in 2018 and now the closing of the SMU in February 2023 at USP Thompson, the BOP will finally ensure that the SMU is now forever banned in any BOP institution.

We encourage supporters of LPP to read the report in its entirety [here](https://www.washlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Cruel-and-Usual-An-Investigation-Into-Prison-Abuse-at-USP-Thomson.pdf) (linked) or at <https://www.washlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Cruel-and-Usual-An-Investigation-Into-Prison-Abuse-at-USP-Thomson.pdf>.



LPP by the NUMBERS - Sierra Shamer

January - October, 2023



JOIN OUR NUMBERS!
Fill out our [Volunteer Interest Form](#) (scan here) or email Jennifer @ jct021@bucknell.edu

160

LPP Bulletin
Orders Filled

1570

Letters Received

1350

Letters Answered

WE'RE HIRING -- Join LPP as a PROJECT COORDINATOR!

The Lewisburg Prison Project (LPP) is looking for a part-time Coordinator who is passionate about social justice and civil rights. The LPP is a non profit organization concerned with the conditions of confinement and that seeks to educate inmates and community members about prisoner civil rights.

The LPP Coordinator will work 10-12 hours weekly from home and at times in the community as a contracted worker for \$25 per hour. On a weekly basis, the Coordinator will keep records of and respond to inmate mail with LPP resources or referrals. The Coordinator will interact with and support the board of directors and volunteers. On a regular basis, the coordinator will engage and educate the community through social media, events, and partnerships. Specific tasks of the coordinator are listed below:

- Website maintenance
- Social media updates / press releases
- Outreach event planning / collaboration with other organizations
- Attend meetings and events
- Support the board of directors
- Pick up, sort, and record mail
- Respond to prison mail/provide referrals and resources
- Manage volunteers
- Maintain donor list
- Create the newsletters and manage fundraising activities
- Write thank you notes to donors
- Manage finances in QuickBooks
- Complete annual non profit paperwork
- Fill bulletin orders

Applicants should send a brief letter of interest along with a resume to angela.trop@gmail.com

Lewisburg Prison Project
P.O. Box 128
Lewisburg, PA 17837

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!