

Class Action Lawsuit Filed to End Torturous Solitary Confinement Conditions in Pennsylvania Prison

Incarcerated Individuals Document Cruel and Unusual Punishment in Legal Filing

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PITTSBURGH - A group of people incarcerated at the State Correctional Institution (SCI) Fayette have filed a class action lawsuit seeking to end the unconstitutional solitary confinement being imposed on men in the Security Threat Group Management Unit (STGMU). The men filed the lawsuit from their solitary confinement cells, without the assistance of attorneys, in October 2022, and, at their request, a team of lawyers from the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project (PILP), Abolitionist Law Center (ALC), and Dechert LLP have now entered the case.

The plaintiffs, including individuals with serious mental illness, describe being isolated in permanent solitary confinement, which exacerbates their symptoms and has led to self-harm and suicide attempts. They are locked in extremely small cells for at least 22 hours a day, and have virtually no contact with others except when they are taken to small outdoor yard cages for one hour on weekdays. They are also denied necessary mental health care, prohibited from working, prevented from participating in educational or rehabilitative programs, and barred from attending religious services.

"I have endured 3,345 days in solitary confinement, and it has deteriorated me into a shell of who I used to be. For years I have been forced into social isolation, deprived of visits with my family and friends, outdoor exercise, and mental health treatment. On my first day, I attempted suicide three times by hanging myself. I have attempted suicide so many times I have lost count," said Montana Bell, one of the lead plaintiffs in the lawsuit. "We filed this lawsuit because we are suffering immensely and believe no one should experience this. This is torture in its highest form and it must end now."

The STGMU holds between 30 and 50 men, the majority of whom are Black and Latinx.

"It is crucial to support the efforts by those incarcerated at SCI Fayette, and across the Commonwealth, in their fight against solitary confinement because no one should be forced to endure these conditions," said Alexandra Morgan-Kurtz, Deputy Director of the Pennsylvania

Institutional Law Project. “It is time for the DOC to eliminate practices long recognized as inhumane and unconstitutional, including the unlawful placement of disabled individuals in circumstances that cause life-threatening harm.”

According to the plaintiffs, many of those condemned to warehousing in the STGMU are never provided the evidence or rationale the DOC used to send them there. This means they cannot challenge the validity or length of this placement. The operations of the unit are managed by secret policies, and DOC officials may halt or set back progression out of the STGMU for an undefined array of conduct, without additional evidence, and without issuing a formal misconduct citation or conducting a hearing.

“The STGMU was draconian. I’m a strong person, but it broke me down, I felt like I was trapped,” said Angel Maldonado, one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit. “I had brothers in there swallowing batteries, razors, tying nooses. We organized this lawsuit because we felt it was a time to make change, we felt like if we didn’t do something positive or take a stand the DOC were going to keep doing this. Our goal is to shut down the STGMU and show people that things can be achieved with unity.”

All of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit have spent at least 11 months in solitary confinement, with some spending as much as 15 years.

“Solitary confinement is state violence weaponized to terrorize incarcerated individuals. Couching it in terms like ‘security threat group management unit’ only attempts to sanitize the reality of what these men are experiencing. Nor is it surprising that the plaintiffs have been subjected to torture based on evidence shrouded in secrecy,” said Robert Saleem Holbrook, Executive Director of the Abolitionist Law Center. “We know the present and future consequences for anyone denied human contact and caged in the most abject and miserable conditions. However, the state has accepted these outcomes as deserving for the mainly Black and Brown citizens they consider disposable. We’re intervening in this lawsuit to support the men victimized by this unconstitutional practice and to put an end to it in Pennsylvania.”

The plaintiffs seek an injunction to end the prolonged cycle of solitary confinement in the STGMU and provide functional avenues for re-entry into the general prison population. They also seek compensatory and punitive damages.

The Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project and Abolitionist Law Center are committed to supporting incarcerated individuals in their fight for justice and an end to the unconstitutional solitary confinement practices in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections.

The lawsuit, *Bell v Little*, 2:22-cv-1516, was filed in the United States District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania. The plaintiffs are represented by Alexandra Morgan-Kurtz and Matthew A. Feldman of the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project; Bret Grote, Nia Holston, and Rupalee Rashatwar of Abolitionist Law Center; Will W. Sachse, Noah Becker, and Stormie Mauck of Dechert LLP.

Read the full Complaint [here](#).

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The Abolitionist Law Center is a public interest law firm and community organizing project inspired by the struggle of political and politicized prisoners, and organized for the purpose of abolishing class and race-based mass incarceration in the United States. Abolitionist Law Center litigates on behalf of people whose human rights have been violated in prison, and organizes to end state violence, empower impacted people, and protect individuals who encounter the criminal legal system while uplifting solutions rooted in healing, liberation, and self-determination. Follow [Abolitionist Law Center](#) on Facebook, [@AbolitionistLC](#) on Twitter, and [@Abolitionistlc](#) on Instagram.

The Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project (PILP) is a legal aid organization that seeks to advance the constitutional and civil rights of people incarcerated and detained in Pennsylvania's jails, prisons, state hospitals, institutions, and immigration detention centers, by providing free civil legal assistance, advocacy, and representation.