

# Disability rights group alleges abuse of people with mental illness at state's maximum-security prison in suit against Department of Correction

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In this 2001 file photo, an empty day room area can be seen with prisoner cells above as a guard escorts a prisoner out of a shower, top left, at the Northern Correctional Institution in Somers. (STEVE MILLER/AP)

A disability rights group has filed a lawsuit against state prison officials, alleging that isolating and shackling people with mental illness at the maximum-security Northern Correctional Institution is a violation of their civil rights.

The complaint, filed Thursday in U.S. District Court by Disability Rights Connecticut, says the state Department of Correction's practice of shackling mentally ill people in their cells and keeping them in isolation units constitutes physical and psychological abuse.

"The Connecticut Department of Correction subjects prisoners with mental illness at Northern to prolonged, and often indefinite, isolation and sensory deprivation, and forcible in-cell shackling that can last for days," the complaint states. "This inhuman treatment of persons with mental illness is physically painful, intentionally humiliating, and causes long-term psychological damage. DOC's continuing abuse of, and discrimination against, people with mental illness must come to an end."

The lawsuit names the department, along with Correction Commissioner Angel Quiros and Northern's warden, Roger Bowles, as defendants.

A spokesman for the department declined to comment on the lawsuit, saying the agency does not discuss pending litigation.

Located in Somers, Northern Correctional Institution opened in 1995 as the state's first supermax prison. It was meant to house the most hardened criminals as well as those who had a record of disciplinary problems at other correctional facilities.

The sprawling prison, which hold close to 600 people, is the physical embodiment of the get-tough-on-crime era. Its population has fallen dramatically in recent years, as Connecticut's overall prison census has dipped to record lows. Last month, there were an average of 71 people incarcerated there each day, down from a daily average of 239 in January 2016.

At his confirmation hearing last week, Quiros said he intends to close two prisons within the year; Northern is widely considered to be one of the likely candidates.

The lawsuit contends that the department has long used Northern to house incarcerated people who are mentally ill, usually to their detriment.

“Northern’s excessively harsh and isolating conditions cause prisoners with mental illness to suffer serious and sometimes catastrophic deterioration in their mental and physical health,” the lawsuit states. “Those same harsh conditions cause previously healthy prisoners to develop mental illness. Many prisoners swallow razors and other objects, smash their heads into the wall, and compulsively cut their own flesh. Many prisoners hear voices, have suicidal thoughts, and attempt suicide. Some have overdosed on drugs or hung themselves.”

Deborah Dorfman, executive director of Disability Rights Connecticut, said the group is asking correction officials to immediately stop using prolonged isolation and in-cell restraints on prisoners with mental illness.

“Rather than provide individuals with mental illness the treatment they need, [the department] is sending them to Northern and subjecting them to solitary confinement, and prolonged isolation,” she said. “People are being subject to treatment that is really horrific.”

The lawsuit cites several specific cases, including that of Kezlyn Méndez, a 34-year-old man who cycled in and out of Northern several times over the years, most recently from December 2017 to May 2018.

“Northern’s harsh environment exacerbated Mr. Méndez’s mental illnesses, and he often found compliance with DOC policies more difficult,” the lawsuit states. “Desperate for human interaction, he would put his hand through the trap of his cell door, in violation of DOC policy. In addition, Mr. Méndez accumulated disciplinary sanctions as his mental health deteriorated, ranging from disobeying direct orders to physical altercations with DOC staff.”

The lawsuit alleges one incident in which correction staff “forcefully restraining him after ordering him to take off his clothes,” the lawsuit states. “One officer punched him in the stomach, and a second grabbed and twisted Mr. Méndez’s testicles.”

Disability Rights Connecticut is represented by the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut, Yale Law School’s Lowenstein International Human Rights Law Clinic, and Morrison & Foerster.

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