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OPINIONS

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End the Marion lockdown

By Abbe Sudvarg
 For The Southern Illinoisan

In the early 1960s, the U.S. Penitentiary at Marion replaced Alcatraz as the most secure federal prison in the United States. But it was not until 1972 that it opened a long-term control unit consisting of 72 six-by-eight-foot cells where men would held in solitary confinement for 23½ hours per day, often for two, three and four years at a time.

As I was finishing my undergraduate degree in 1979 and 1980, I worked with an organization in St. Louis whose goal was to end the control unit at the Marion prison. We believed that solitary confinement for years at a time was cruel and unusual punishment.

We were also concerned about allegations that prisoners were being beaten by guards, having urine thrown on them and being subjected to strip searches and rectal probes without just cause. We were concerned because the men confined to the control unit were not necessarily the more violent prisoners but the more defiant. The control unit was being used to silence critics of prison policies, religious leaders and economic and philosophic dissidents within the prison system.

In late 1980, I moved away from St. Louis to go to medical school and, like most of us, I forgot all about the prisoners at Marion. It was easy to forget them. I had never been to jail, and none of my family or friends had ever "done time." But now, in 1989, I find that I cannot continue ignoring those prisoners. Living and working in Southern Illinois, I am aware the Marion prison is only about 30 miles away, and it is worse than ever.

In 1978, the Bureau of Prisons began planning to operate Marion as a locked-down prison. In October 1983, after an isolated incident in which two prison guards were killed, virtually all of the Marion prison became a control unit. And now,

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almost six years later, most of the more than 400 men at Marion Prison are still locked in their six-by-nine-foot cells (a space about the size of a bathroom) for 23 hours a day. Before this cruel and unusual policy was instituted, the last time an American prison had kept most of its inmates in constant solitary confinement for year after year was in the 1800s. That practice had been abandoned because it drove prisoners insane.

The federal courts have given both federal and state authorities power to transfer prisoners to Marion for any reason. In other words, a man can be put into solitary confinement for years at a time with no due process and no right to appeal.

Only 20 percent of the prisoners at Marion have a security rating appropriate for that institution. Others are sent there because of minor infractions such as organizing work strikes, leading religious services, or filing legal writs.

In fact, any inmate must drop any litigation against the prison system before he can be transferred out of Marion. This is one way that the Bureau of Prisons attempts to silence those in the best position to bring legal action against the cruel

and unusual punishment at the Marion prison.

Not only are the men at Marion being held in cells the size of dog kennels for 23 hours a day without due legal process, but they are being forced to endure many other cruelties, too.

Many have been shackled to their concrete bunks, spread-eagled, for hours to days at a time. They are constantly subjected to strip searches and rectal probes, ostensibly to check for contraband. Moreover, the prisoners must drink, and bathe in, water that is drawn from Crab Orchard Lake, a water source so contaminated with PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls — a known carcinogen) that no local community is willing to use it.

Prisoners also have been physically beaten by guards since all of the Marion prison became a control unit, an allegation that has never been adequately investigated by any independent observer.

Currently, the Marion prison is the only U.S. prison being scrutinized by Amnesty International, the Nobel Prize winning organization that monitors human rights violations throughout the world. In 1987, Amnesty International issued a statement to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons saying that there is scarcely a rule in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners “that is not infringed in some way or other” at Marion.

Although it would be easy to forget the men at the Marion prison, many of us cannot forget. Tomorrow, concern for those men will be demonstrated by more than 200 people gathering at the prison with a very basic, but very unyielding, message: The cruelty within the walls of Marion Prison must end.

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