

local news

Indicting the system

Transsexual and other activists join to publicize and condemn abuses against trans prisoners

by Inga Sorensen

It's a problem Ashley Sinclair and others say must be addressed.

"There is a lot of abuse that goes on of trans people within our prison system—abuse that comes not only from other prisoners but from guards and the institutions themselves," says the 27-year-old trans rights activist.

Sinclair is the administrative director of the Jasmine Foundation, a year-old organization that focuses on transsexual and other transgender prisoners' issues.

Group members, who include people from Washington, Oregon and California, orchestrated a July 14 protest in front of the Walla Walla County Superior Courthouse in Washington in an effort to educate the public about alleged abuses of transgender prisoners within the state corrections system.

According to Sinclair, an Oregonian, the demonstration centered specifically on transsexual prisoner Crystal Schwenk, who claims a corrections officer sexually assaulted her.

Protesters brandished signs that called for an end to the "rape and neglect of transsexual prisoners" and distributed flyers highlighting Schwenk's charges and details of her pending lawsuit against the Washington Department of Corrections.

Sinclair says Seattle-area resident Stephanie Krier, executive director of the Jasmine Foundation and a former inmate in the Washington state prison system, also has a pending lawsuit against the Department of Corrections alleging mistreatment.

According to Sinclair, the abuse of transgender prisoners is very common.

"We often hear stories from trans prisoners who say they've been sexually harassed or abused by other inmates as well as guards. When I started learning more about this, the thing that surprised me most was how institutionalized it was," she explains. "In-



Protesters outside the Walla Walla County Courthouse

mates' stories are very similar in that they say when they've gone to prison officials, they're basically ignored or told the abuse is part of their punishment. Prison administrators say things like, 'You should have thought about that before you wound up here.'"

She adds that mistreatment of trans inmates also takes the form of neglect, particularly around hormone therapy.

"Many are victims of medical neglect while in the system. Prison officials will almost always refuse to allow inmates to receive hormone treatment, even when the prisoner has a doctor's prescription," she says. "We've heard similar stories about inmates with HIV being denied treatment."

According to Sinclair, while the problem of trans abuse in prisons appears to be widespread, rousing concern over the matter is not easy.

"It is difficult working on prison-justice issues because of the common public perception that prisoners have it easy and anything that happens to them in there is part of their deserved punishment," she says.

Portlander Diana Courvant, who attended the protest, understands that perspective well.

"I didn't want to know what Crystal was in for, because I thought it might prejudice me," says Courvant, who is involved with the trans group It's Time, Oregon! "I wanted to stay focused on the issue of abuse and how that is wrong."

She adds, "This experience has been a good one for me. Most actions I'm involved with don't take me out of my comfort zone. This, however, rubbed against where my assumptions lie and forced me to re-examine my own values."

According to Sinclair, public response to the Walla Walla protest was positive.

She says one person, upon reading a flyer, told of his own abuse by prison guards, while several others expressed outrage that the guard who committed the alleged assault on Schwenk is still employed by the state Department of Corrections.

The Portland Bisexual Alliance threw its support behind the demonstration.

"As bisexuals we feel we need to have a strong connection with the trans community," says PBA activist Sven Bonnichsen. "After all, bisexuals

and trans people are the Johnny- and Janey-come-latelies of the queer movement."

Sinclair says the bulk of letters to the Jasmine Foundation from trans inmates claiming abuse have come from Washington, "and that may be due to Crystal's case."

She adds that she knows of no similar case within Oregon's corrections system, though she believes there likely are trans inmates facing tough times.

"Bringing this issue to light is still so new. It wasn't until very recently that hate crimes against trans people were even documented," she points out. She says the Jasmine Foundation is working to educate corrections officials and the public in Washington, Oregon and elsewhere about mistreatment of trans inmates, and will push for regulatory changes to combat the problem.

To contact the foundation, call (541) 757-3689 or write to Jasmine Foundation, PO Box 131 NW 4th St., Suite 204, Corvallis, OR 97330.

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