

April 28, 2008

Good morning and thank you for allowing me to speak on behalf of the men at Tamms. I am a member of the John Howard Association of Illinois Board of Directors and I am head of the Tamms Committee, an organization that was formed as a support group for those who have loved ones at Tamms Correctional Center in Tamms, Illinois.

I have been visiting men at Tamms once a month since 2000. I do this because I care about these men and care about justice and humanity. There are many people who will talk to you about the legal aspects of Tamms, the psychological aspects of Tamms, those who have been incarcerated at Tamms and those who have family at Tamms.

I come to you from the point of view of someone who has visited five different men at Tamms. Over the past eight years, I have listened to inmates talk, watched them grow older and change for the better and for the worse. I have worked in the area of prison reform for many years and through my work I met a woman who asked if I could visit a man at Tamms who was very lonely, very young and no one ever came to see him. I said I would.

I watched this young man change dramatically; last year he was released from prison after having served his time. The entire time he was at Tamms he was in what is called "seg;" he could never get out of that level. He, as all Tamms inmates are, was in solitary confinement, but he was allowed only one visitor per month. He was allowed one shower a week and one hour a day he could walk in the enclosed exercise area, alone. I gave him a book on Yoga and he took it to the exercise area and was given a ticket (a reprimand) because he had a book with him. No one can have a ball, a mat, or book in that area. Nothing.

Prior to my visiting him, this young man regularly mutilated himself badly. His whole left arm was scared. I would like to think I had something to do with the fact that he stopped this behavior after I began my visits, but it could have been anyone reaching out to him. His letters became more upbeat. He began drawing pictures for me and sending me poetry.

His case is not atypical. As you have heard and will hear, there are no programs at Tamms. Families and friends must send money for prisoners to get commissary items such as televisions and radios, but others have nothing except extreme deprivation. I want to compare this to the federal supermax prison in Florence, Colorado, that houses terrorists such as the Unabomber, the Shoe Bomber, Jose Padilla, Zacarias Moussawi and Eric Rudolph: I think you get the idea. There the inmates are allowed a radio and TV; they get cable TV and have radio stations such as NPR and BBC. They have educational programs on the TV and when they earn the privilege, they can play basketball with other inmates.

Many of the men at Tamms are excellent artists and try to work with the materials they have. They must become inventive and find ways to express themselves. They only have a flexible four inch pen and the paper that is given to them. One man has used large legal-sized envelopes to create poster-sized drawings that are exceptional. Men also use food products for coloring. In 2005, I wrote to then-Warden Sheldon Frey to see if I could send crayons, pastels, chalk or charcoal to the advanced artists. He replied quickly, No. He said: "Art supplies are not currently approved property for offenders incarcerated at Tamms.

The dire need for these men to see family is constantly told to me whether in a letter or when I visit. "Please call my mom," one will ask. "Can you find my auntie?" another man asked. I was so pleased when I could and now that man is getting letters from his aunt. I wish I could solve other problems so easily. For the most part, the expense of traveling to Tamms is impossible for a family, and the lack of family makes the isolation that much more intolerable.

I ask that the legislators go to Tamms and talk to the prisoners. Don't be fooled by the shiny exterior of the comparatively new facility. The people who are speaking here today are concerned about what is happening to the men inside. The indeterminate sentencing of Tamms prisoners adds tremendous stress and anxiety that they already feel because of solitary confinement. Talk to the men. Everything, their lives, is at the discretion of the guards and the powers that be. There is no legal help for them.

I ask that the legislators recommend that men be held at Tamms no longer than 180 days as it was first promised and that mentally ill men get the help they need, which is not solitary confinement.