



ACLU Intern Investigates Prison Medical Care

By Shannon Richmond

October 2006 -- This summer I had the incredible opportunity to serve as an intern for the ACLU of Oregon and Western Prison Project's joint study of medical care provided in Oregon prisons. This joint project was a response to the large quantity of medical-care complaints both organizations receive from inmates. Prior to my internship, the ACLU of Oregon and Western Prison Project developed a comprehensive survey on prison medical care. This was mailed to Western Prison Project's incarcerated members as well as those who had written to the ACLU of Oregon about medical care in prison. Over the course of the summer, I received, read, and catalogued more than 150 medical-care surveys. These surveys represented prisoners from eight of the 13 Oregon prisons. As an intern, my goal was to systematize the information from these surveys so that both organizations could analyze the results.

I started by developing a spreadsheet that catalogued the survey respondents' personal information. Because the surveys were returned to both the ACLU of Oregon and Western Prison Project, I specified each survey's location. To maintain the privacy of the respondents, I assigned an identification number to each survey for use in an online database accessible by both organizations. The identification number made it possible for us to compile and analyze the information without using any inmate's personally identifying information. The identification number allows anyone analyzing the data the ability to locate and reference the actual survey for further information if needed. Once the database was complete, I developed profiles of the four prisons with the most respondents: Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution, Oregon State Penitentiary, Snake River Correctional Institution, and Two Rivers Correctional Institution. From these profiles, comparisons can be made in areas such as infectious disease treatment, emergency dental and medical care, information provided about medical care to prisoners, and treatment for chronic illnesses or conditions.

While many respondents did not complete the entire survey, the results will give direction for further questioning and/or surveying of medical care provided in Oregon prisons. With this information catalogued, Western Prison Project and the ACLU of Oregon have the option of further research in specific prisons regarding medical care. In turn, this information will highlight more serious concerns for staff members of both organizations as they work to improve prison medical care. For the ACLU of Oregon, this may be examining possible violations of prisoners' rights to health care that are widespread and most frequent.

Because I strongly believe in prisoners' rights, this project was a meaningful and informative experience for me. I enjoyed working alongside the staff of both organizations and feel honored to have been a part of their research into medical care conditions in Oregon prisons.