

# The MacArthur Justice Center

Northwestern University  
School of Law  
375 East Chicago Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois 60611

phone 312-503-1016  
fax 312-503-1272



## *Legal Director*

Locke E. Bowman  
312-503-0844

[l-bowman@law.northwestern.edu](mailto:l-bowman@law.northwestern.edu)

## *Lecturer and Trial Attorney*

Joseph Margulies  
312-503-0890

[j-margulies@law.northwestern.edu](mailto:j-margulies@law.northwestern.edu)

## *Board of Directors*

Solange MacArthur  
John R. MacArthur  
James Liggett

**For immediate release**

**April 28, 2008**

For more information:

Nora Ferrell, 312-408-2580 x 24  
773-510-4819 (cell)  
Laurie Jo Reynolds,  
773-505-3896 (cell)

## **Former Inmates Describe Psychological Torture at State Supermax Prison During Illinois House Committee Hearing**

### ***Former Prisoners, Psychological Experts Testify about Frequent Suicide Attempts, Self Mutilation and High Rates of Mental Illness at Tamms Prison 10 Years after Opening***

CHICAGO—The Illinois House of Representatives Committee on Prison Reform held a hearing today in Chicago to review the current conditions at Tamms Supermax Prison—a “supermaximum security” prison in southern Illinois where prisoners are sent for extra punishment. The prison was intended for short-term incarceration (1-2 years) during which time prisoners are in permanent solitary confinement. However, 88 men have been at Tamms since the prison opened 10 years ago and are being held indefinitely.

“Permanent solitary confinement, often for years at a time with no end in sight, is a form of psychological torture, and it often leads to mental illness,” said Jean Maclean Snyder, an attorney who has represented Tamms’ prisoners in the past. “And when some of these men finally do return to society, Tamms has left them worse off than before they went in. It’s time to reevaluate the effectiveness of supermax prisons.”

At the hearing, former Tamms’ prisoners, psychological experts, family members of current prisoners, and attorneys who have represented Tamms’ detainees testified about the detrimental effects of prolonged solitary confinement and the behavior that often results including suicide attempts, self mutilation and severe mental illness.

Supermax prisons like Tamms have been criticized nationally and internationally for the prolonged isolation of prisoners and the range of mental and physical problems that often result when people are placed in permanent solitary confinement for years with little to no human contact. At Tamms, prisoners are confined to their cells 23-24 hours per day, food is served in the cell, there are no programs or activities, phone calls are prohibited, and prisoners often hear nothing but constant screaming or banging.

“It is in this context of near- total isolation and idleness that psychiatric symptoms emerge in previously healthy prisoners. In less healthy ones, there is psychosis, mania or compulsive acts of self-abuse or suicide,” said Dr. Terry Kupers, a psychiatrist and expert on the psychological effects of Tamms and other supermax prisons who testified at today’s hearing.

“Most Americans think that Guantanamo Bay is inhumane, and the two worst units are modeled after U.S. supermax prisons like Tamms,” said Laurie Jo Reynolds, a leader of Tamms Year Ten,

a group of prisoners' family members, concerned citizens and activists that have been fighting to end psychological torture at Tamms. "The IDOC tries to justify this by calling these guys 'the worst of the worst.' But no one is sent there for their crime, and many aren't even there for disciplinary violations. And even if they were, what interest does our state have in torturing them? Psychological torture can't be justified for military detainees, and it can't be justified for people in state custody."

Nationally, supermaxes are on the decline with some closing or converting to regular maximum security prisons due to questions about the impacts and effectiveness of permanent solitary confinement, as well as the high cost of running supermax prisons. According to the Illinois Department of Corrections, the average annual cost of housing a prisoner at Tamms is two to three times as much as any other adult prison in Illinois. (On average per prisoner costs: Tamms: \$58,994, Pontiac: \$32,121, Menard: \$19,190) And Tamms Ten Year Ten says the actual cost per Tamms supermax prisoner is closer to \$90,000. (The \$58,994 is an average between the cost of minimum security camp and the supermax at Tamms.)

"The fact that we're paying tens of thousands of dollars more to lock people up at Tamms when there is no benefit to the prisoner or the larger society is mind boggling," said Locke Bowman, legal director of the MacArthur Justice Center. "Throwing more money away on an abusive system at Tamms that doesn't work is not the answer."

"This is clearly something we need to be working on to make lives better for the incarcerated as well as for the families of the incarcerated," said Illinois Sen. Rickey Hendon (5<sup>th</sup> District).

Former prisoners and family members of Tamms' inmates gathered in front of the Thompson Center before the hearing to silently chalk off every day that Tamms has been open (more than 3600 days) on a giant black banner to highlight how long some inmates have been in permanent isolation.

Mental health professionals, prisoners' family members, attorneys and advocates are calling on the Illinois House of Representatives to end psychological torture at Tamms.

###