

Statement to the
Illinois House Prison Management and Reform Legislation Committee
10 a.m., April 27, 2001
Thompson Center, Chicago, Illinois

My name is Jean Maclean Snyder. I am a lawyer with the MacArthur Justice Center of the University of Chicago Law School, which is a public interest law firm that does litigation about criminal justice issues.

One of the issues that interests us is the treatment of prisoners. Some of the prisoners we're most concerned about reside at Tamms Correctional Center, Illinois' supermax prison. (We currently represent a group of prisoners at Tamms challenging the confinement of seriously mentally ill prisoners at that prison and we also work with many relatives of prisoners at Tamms.)

You might think that Tamms has nothing to do with the subject of recidivism. The Department of Corrections tell us that this prison houses the worst inmates in the system, and many people think that inmates who are sent to the supermax downstate will never walk the streets of Chicago or Springfield again.

That's not true. Most of the men at Tamms will be released from prison. They will be entering the free community from an environment of extreme social isolation, severely restricted movement, and limited sensory stimulation. Those conditions are known to and do cause serious psychological problems in some prisoners. Only a year ago, the United Nations Committee Against Torture announced its conclusion that U.S. supermaxes raised important human rights concerns and criticized them for being "excessively harsh." The legislature should be troubled as well.

When Tamms opened in March 1998, the word was that prisoners would have to serve a year there. After that, if they behaved, they could be transferred out. But it's been three years

now, and only a handful of prisoners have graduated from Tamms. Every month that passes with nobody moving out makes it harder to understand the rationale for this prison. Every additional month increases the likelihood that prisoners will carry the destructive effects of Tamms with them when they go to other prisons or to the free community.

The relatives of men at Tamms talk about these problems. They fear what will happen to their men if they spend more time at Tamms. And they fear what will happen when they come home.

Family members are affected most directly by the visitation policies at Tamms, and that's one subject I want to mention in the short time we have here. We know that maintaining family ties is important for reducing recidivism. Visitation is particularly important for family connections at Tamms because phone calls with family and friends are prohibited.

- Although two thirds of Tamms inmates come from the Chicago area, the prison is a six-hour drive from Chicago and can't be reached by public transportation.

- Each visit must be set up weeks in advance and requires several rounds of paperwork. The visit is set for an exact time of day – 10:30 am on June 30, for example. If the visitor arrives late, the visit is forfeited.

- Visitors are separated from the prisoner by a glass partition – a “non-contact” visit. People talk through a microphone that requires everyone to raise their voices to be heard. Families have told us that elderly or hard-of-hearing visitors often simply give up on having a conversation.

- Even though the prisoner and visitors have no physical contact, the prisoner's legs are shackled and his hands may be cuffed behind him so that he cannot gesture as he talks or blow his nose when he sneezes.

- There are no exceptions to the “no contact” policy. One little girl who was dying of cancer told the Make a Wish Foundation that she wanted to visit her father at Tamms and hug him one last time. The Foundation wished that she would pick a trip to Disney World – but she didn’t. So the Foundation paid for the girl’s visit to Tamms, where the girl saw her father through a glass booth and could not hug or kiss him.

As this Committee thinks about recidivism, I hope you will consider what it means to have prisoners spend long periods of time at Tamms. I also hope you look at the question of financial costs. We spend nearly \$70,000 a year to house an inmate at Tamms.* That’s almost as much as we spend on basic education for All IDOC inmates – the figure is \$2.19* per adult inmate, which comes to \$96,000 for IDOC’s 44,000 inmates. That’s not enough money to house two Tamms inmates.

I want to close by reading part of a recent letter from a man at Tamms.

"Dear Jean:

I don't know what kind of mind control devices they have [at Tamms], but it's endless and I'm dying, as well as dead. They are able to talk to me through the mind by throwing their voice in my head somehow, telling me all kinds of lies about what they are going to do if I did this that and the other . . .

I’ve started going through changes. I'd forget things. I'd wake up not knowing. Then the window. I start seeing birds, bees, flies, bugs and other small bugs do strange things, things that weren't normal by a long shot.

Then my food. When I chewed it turned into water. Then everybody stopped talking to me, and gave me a voice to talk to me instead and they would laugh and crack jokes about it.

But more important than all else, is the fact that I'm dead. Have been made to believe I'm a devil or son of God. I've been killed about 9 to 10 times now. Now they are killing me as punishment, as they say, yet feel that nothing is wrong with this.

* See attachment.

* See attachment.

I have to go now because of my body, but more proof I have is in my throat, it's falling apart from the poison I was fed, a few more swallows and it'll be gone . . ."

Signed, a Tamms inmate.

Incarcerated in 1987 for armed robbery.

Transferred to Tamms in April 1998.

Due to be released from prison in 2017.