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Abu Ghraib Right Here In South Carolina Federal Prison, Says Abused Inmate

Inmate Larry Lawton says at least three inmates have died due to improper medical attention. He has sent letters to numerous U.S. Senators without a response and is filing legal charges against prison authorities for his own medical condition being ignored by authorities.
4 Aug 2005

By Greg Szymanski

There are many prison stories that never see the light of day, but Lawrence Lawton's isn't one of them. And for trying to go public, he received five months "in the hole," punishment for trying to blow the whistle on prison abuse leading to the deaths of three other inmates.

Although there is little public sympathy for prisoners, even the most hardened of hearts might take a second look at the inhumane treatment Lawton and the three dead inmates received at the hands of prison authorities at the Federal Correctional Institution in Edgefield, South Carolina.

Convicted in 1996 for interstate jewelry theft, Lawton, 41, was sentenced to 12 years. He is due to be released in 2007, but in the meantime he says "he's stuck in a federal pen worse than Abu Ghraib."

"I believe the death of at least three inmates recently has been caused by the direct medical neglect of the prison staff," said Lawton from his South Carolina prison cell. "The abuse of prisoners is due to a lack of money, overcrowding, a lack of staff training and a lack of medical care."

Prison authorities would not comment on Lawton's claims, but his attorney Steve Lander, said his client "has no reason to lie" and is providing credible information about the deaths of the other inmates.

Lander is representing Lawton against federal prison authorities in a civil abuse case, claiming his client is receiving improper medical attention for a severe scoliosis condition, a condition which is being ignored by authorities.

"He's not the type of person who complains and according to my client, prison authorities are still ignoring his condition despite being alerted to his severe problem," said Lander this week from his law office in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

To call public attention to the severity of his scoliosis problem and the problem of a lack of medical care for the three other inmates who died, Lawton has written letters to a host of U.S. Senators, including Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL), Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-SC), Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY), Sen. Charles Schumer (D-NY) and Sen. Richard Burr (R-NC).

"Due to my letters and inquiries into these very serious matters, I was put in the hole for what they said was an investigation. That's the magic word," said Lawton, who is still waiting for responses from the Senators he wrote. "I spent five months in the hole for minor infractions that carry very little or absolutely no hole time.

"Also, numerous prison staff members told me it was my constant complaining to Congress about improper medical care at this federal facility that landed me in solitary confinement. Please, someone, contact the Senators for me in order that I may get some help so that conditions here can be improved."

Lawton's elderly mother, Irene, also verified he spent five months in the hole, saying she had no direct evidence it was due to his letters sent to Congress but she strong suspicions hat her son's whistle blowing was the direct cause.

"I know my son isn't getting proper attention for his medical condition and he told me about what happened to the other prisoners. I think the prison authorities punished him for bringing these abuses out in the open," said Lawton's mother in a telephone conversation from her Florida home.

One of the prison abuses reported by Lawton and related to poor medical care was the facts surrounding the death of Inmate Shifflett, who died March 25, 2005. According to Lawton, Shifflett was suffering from cancer, spitting up blood and tissue for more than a week, but was essentially left unattended by prison authorities until finally he died in his cell.

Describing the brutal and inhumane death, Lawton said:

"His cellmate, Inmate Brawley, went to the head of the medical unit at the afternoon meal, explaining the situation and was told to tell Shifflett to sign up for sick call. That night he awoke Brawley begging for help and there was blood all over the cell.

"It took the prison authorities over 30 minutes to get Shifflett out of his cell and by that time he was already dead He was only 41 years old and didn't they know he had cancer? And Brawley said it was the most brutal and inhumane death he ever saw."

Besides Shifflett, Lawton tells the story of Inmate Arch who died surrounding strange circumstances on September 15, 2004:

"For more than a week, Arch was complaining of chest pains, arm pains and feeling ill. He kept going t the medical department and was always told he had gas pains and to stop complaining. Arch was given Maalox and told to go back to his sell, but when he was walking back, he grabbed inmate Brown, saying 'help me, Jimmy, I'm dying' and right there on the spot he dropped dead.

"Later, the prison investigators, asked Brown and another inmate named Alberson in an intimidating fashion: 'Didn't you see him hit his head?' Alberson and Brown can verify what I am saying and even add much more."

Lawton then goes on to talk about another inmate name Harris who died in his cell early one morning after receiving inadequate treatment the night before. He also talks about witnessing another inmate near him in solitary confinement undergoing brutal and inhumane treatment.

"While I was in the hole, there was inmate across from me who had no legs. His condition was so poor that a Lieutenant on duty took a video and told me if someone saw this video, someone would be in handcuffs," said Lawton. "I found out when someone dies, a death mortality review is done, but the question is who does the review? I found out through a staff member who explained like this: 'It's like the hen guarding the hen house. She's going to protect her nest.'"

In his letter to the U.S. Senators, Lawton outlined what he thought to be the most serious problems at the prison needing immediate attention, which included no medical staff on duty after midnight, only one guard for two units on the midnight shift and keys to open cells are not given to guards in case of emergency.

"Why is there no medical staff on duty after midnight?" asked Lawton, adding the Department of Prisons categorizes Edgefield as a 24 hour medical care facility serving over 2,200 inmates.

"The inhumane treatment of inmates here at Edgefield has at the very best contributed to the deaths of numerous inmates. The outrage about Abu Ghraib is justified and right. But I want people in America to know that we have our own Abu Ghraib right here in our own backyard."

To write Lawton in prison in order to lend assistance, he is at:

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