

## *What Has Wisconsin's Department of Corrections Got to Hide?*

Just a few weeks ago, Wisconsin's Department of Corrections Director of Research and Policy, Mr. Tony Streveler, spoke before an audience of more than one hundred people at a meeting of Milwaukee's Community Justice Council. All seemed to be going well until one member of the audience pointed out that Mr. Streveler's statistics failed to present the fact that Wisconsin has been the worst state in the nation for disproportionately incarcerating blacks. That comment unleashed a torrent of questions and comments focusing on the Department's practices. One audience member spoke to what he said were inhumane practices in placing inmates in solitary confinement. Privately, that audience member said that the solitary confinement practices of Wisconsin's Department of Corrections (DOC), in fact, violate the threshold set by the United Nations for cruel and unusual punishment. Wouldn't it be useful to know if this sanction is disproportionately meted out to blacks?

Another question at the meeting had to do with what are known as "compassionate releases." A compassionate release is an immediate release on the grounds of an inmate's compelling circumstances like imminent death, terminal illness or, in some states, being afflicted with certain chronic illnesses. Questions as simple as how many compassionate releases per year are granted in Wisconsin are met with DOC's standard refrain of "We don't know because we don't keep data on that." Ask anything about solitary confinements, such as the numbers of those placed in solitary confinement, by race, or even not by race, and you'll get the same answer: "We don't know because we don't keep data on that."

The Felmers O. Chaney Community Advocacy Board (FCAB), formerly known as the Felmers O. Chaney Correctional Center Community Advisory Board, has certainly heard this refrain. That is because FCAB has been trying, unsuccessfully, to get answers from the Department of Corrections, on very simple questions, for nearly three years. When a department fails to provide what amounts to public information, it makes it difficult for the public to gauge that department's success in reaching its organizational goals. FCAB has asked repeatedly, for example, to be provided with the recidivism rate for inmates formerly incarcerated at the Felmers O. Chaney Correctional Center. When he was asked about this at the Milwaukee Community Justice Council meeting, mentioned above, Mr. Streveler said that DOC will not release this information because it might be misinterpreted or misapplied. But, this is public information! Why should DOC have the right to selectively provide information as it chooses? Shouldn't we taxpayers, who pay the salaries of DOC staff, have a right to such information? Could they be trying to hide something?

Without data on matters such as the recidivism rates that are associated with different correctional centers, over time, how does the public know how well a given center is doing in reducing recidivism? The practice of refusing to divulge information is not consistent with evidence-based planning, and it is not consistent with generating the kind of community support and input that can be of great value in helping to achieve desirable inmate rehabilitation and reintegration goals. But, because DOC won't release data on its practices, it keeps everyone in the dark. What is it, exactly, that DOC has got to hide?

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