

SENSORY DEPRIVATION CELLS
at
Santa Rita Jail
(Killing us Quietly at Your Expense)

So many community members are perplexed and wonder why the Santa Rita Jail (“SRJ”) has one of the highest suicide rates among prisoners housed at county jails in the United States. This article will provide some of the answers.

If you have a family member, friend, or a loved one housed at SRJ, you should fear and be genuinely concerned for their lives and safety.

From the moment of intake to release, a prisoner at SRJ is subjected to numerous human and civil rights violations.

The Inmate Transfer Receiving/Release Department at SRJ is known as ITR. Once a prisoner is booked into the jail, they are placed in a filthy cell for up to 72 hours awaiting a bed. ITR has an infamous reputation. While housed here, the only sounds you hear are the blowing of cold air and the banging and yelling of other prisoners awaiting their fate.

Those needing medical attention, mental health treatment, or a simple necessity as toilet paper, can go ignored for hours.

A person newly booked into SRJ is commonly known as a “new book.” The time spent in ITR can be one of the most depressing and stress-filled time in a person’s life. There is no sign-off sheet which would be used to check on the status of a “new book.” Our loved ones are left alone. If one reads the East Bay Times, you will clearly see that the conditions in ITR do not just hurt people, they drive people to take their own lives. This is not hyperbole; it is supported by data and facts.

Once a person is actually classified and arrives at a cell – any cell at SRJ – they will find a 4 inch by 6-foot window. The windows in our cells are frosted over so you are unable to see the sky or outside.

The feeling of hopelessness and the sense of isolation becomes overwhelming at times. The Alameda County Sheriff's Office asserts that the frosted windows still allow light to enter the cell and we should be satisfied with that.

Please let me tell you that it is not good enough. Even people who do not suffer with mental illness, these sensory deprivation tactics can have a deleterious effect on your mental and emotional wellbeing.

If you have mental health issues, the sensory-deprived environment at SRJ can exacerbate your condition. The voices inside your head get louder; the walls close in tighter; real life problems are magnified; you miss your wife, your children, your husband; you worry about the job you've lost and if your family will be evicted because you are not there. Even strong people are broken inside this place.

If you are lucky, your Pod (housing unit) will get outside yard time once a week. On the medium, max, and ad-seg (administrative segregation) side, your "yard" is a concrete box – 20 feet in height with chain link fencing above. The minimum/protective custody side has an open yard. They will see the sky, a cloud, or perhaps a bird. They may feel the breeze or feel the warmth of the sun on their face, a chance to be human – once a week. Then it is back to your sensory deprived box.

One of the true terrors at SRJ are its isolation cells. These cells have no outside light at all, only a window in the cell door. ISO cells afford very little contact with anyone.

Prior to the Babu litigation case, (Babu v. Ahern, et al., Case No. 5:18-cv-07677), men and women would be left in the ISO cells for months...up to a year. Their mental illness would only get worse, and they would act out in order to receive any kind of acknowledgement that they existed or even mattered to anyone.

With “acting out” comes repercussions and consequences; perhaps you will receive a old-fashioned beat down from one of Alameda County’s “finest.”; or perhaps you will be chained and shackled, and placed back into isolation until you calm down. It becomes a vicious cycle and becomes your only sense of actually feeling alive. It is a disgusting existence.

Even while being transported to court, a prisoner will request a window seat of which there are only four (4) on the entire transport bus; transport vans have no windows at all.

The conditions at SRJ are draconian and barbaric. These conditions are duplicated all over the United States, but that doesn’t make it right or just.

Human beings are social creatures. We crave the feel of sunshine, the sounds of nature, the whisper of leaves in a tree, or the feel of rain and the gust of wind during a storm. Without these simple pleasures, we become less than human and liken to a caged animal awaiting slaughter.

Our hearts hurt when we look into the eyes of neglected dogs and cats on television. I encourage you to come look into the eyes of the deprived human beings housed at SRJH. Come look into the eyes of the broken, the empty, and the isolated.

There is a department at SRJ known as the Americans with Disabilities Act section or ADA for short.

ADA claims to have raised the issue of the frosted-over cell windows to the higher echelon administrators, citing mental wellness. The ADA has advocated for providing clean windows which offer prisoners an unobstructed view of the “free” world.

This commonsense change is shot down and denied every time because the so-called “higher ups” want us in a state which leaves us broken, dejected, and defeated.

Just to get out of this jail, women and men will take or agree to a plea deal they would have never agreed to if they were thinking clearly. If they felt valued, loved, or cared about – many would fight. But when these human beings lose their will to fight, suicide becomes the only option to end their suffering.

I’ve personally seen nine (9) body bags be carried out of Ad Seg here at SRJ. Three of the nine were housed in my own Pod. I’ve watched the almost festive mood and attitude of SRJ staff getting together for another “new event” or death.

I’ve listened to the dead prisoner’s skull bounce down the steps because the deputies were too lazy to lift the body bag high enough to clear the concrete stairs. I hear that sound many a night as I lay here sleepless.

The deaths won’t stop until YOU say, “Enough is enough!” Our voices long to be heard but it’s your voice which will achieve CHANGE!

Let us see outside! Amplify our struggle!

~~ SANTA RITA JAIL FREEDOM COLLECTIVE