

texas tea newsletter

A home-brewed publisher devoted to exposing the secrets of the Texas Civil Commitment Center in Littlefield, Texas.



in this issue

What's Brewing This Month?

This month's tea is full of articles detailing on the "pig slop" served within Texas prisons, an Insider News account, and a short devotional from Our Daily Bread.

Want to Share Your Story?

Send any crucial documentation you want to share with us to texasteanewsletter@gmail.com or to P.O. Box 3226, San Marcos, Texas 78666 to allow us to enact change within the Texas Civil Commitment Center.

let's spill the tea

By the Editor

Greetings! Welcome to another issue of the Texas Tea Newsletter.

It is with great disappointment that we here at TTN have decided to temporarily send out our newsletters bimonthly due to inflation of printing and mailing costs. We will continue to produce monthly issues, but until further notice, each mailed letter will contain two newsletters.

F.A.C.T.S. members and TTN staff have been busy this February! We have collectively attended the TCCO Board Meeting in Austin, Texas on the 16th, spoke before the Senate Finance Committee on the 21st, and have made plans to go back to the Capitol on the 28th to speak before the House of Representatives. Do not lose hope, we are vigorously working each and every minute to have your voices heard!

To continue that note, we have decided to bring back the Insider News section of TTN! This portion of the newsletter allows our readers outside of the Texas Civil Commitment Center to have a primary source to the ongoing within the razor wire.

Please send out encouraging communications if you have family members or friends that will be speaking to the House of Representatives on the 28th. We need the plenty of courage to go before those who are powerful enough to make changes. Thank you so much for tuning in. Let's serve up that tea!

After 10 Days, Dozens of Texas Prisoners Remain on Hunger Strike Protesting Solitary Confinement Practices

By **Jolie McCullough** with **KWTX10** | January 20, 2023

Ten days after Texas prisoners around the state [began a hunger strike](#) to protest the state's harsh solitary confinement practices, dozens of men are still refusing food, and some are reportedly losing pounds of weight a day.

Texas prisoners in solitary confinement are kept in single-person cells for at least 22 hours a day. When staffing levels allow — which can be rare — they get out of their cells to shower or exercise alone in caged outdoor areas. Thousands of prisoners are kept in such conditions, and they are typically held in isolation for years.

In November, more than 500 Texas prisoners had been in solitary confinement for more than a decade, according to prison officials.

Under department policy, prisoners are assigned to solitary if they are escape risks, have committed violent assaults or serious offenses in prison, or are confirmed members of dangerous prison gangs. For months, men at multiple Texas prisons have been urging prison officials and lawmakers to move away from the practice of putting — and keeping — prisoners in solitary because they are affiliated with a gang, even if they have had no behavioral problems.

Without a notable response to their proposal, they began the hunger strike last Tuesday, on the first day of the state Legislature.

Brittany Robertson, an independent activist who has coordinated with men in more than a dozen prisons before and during the hunger strike, said she estimated hundreds of men began refusing food last week. On Jan. 13, the first day the Texas Department of Criminal Justice officially recognized the strike because three days had passed, the prison system reported 72 prisoners were starving themselves.

By Tuesday, the number dropped to 51,

according to TDCJ spokesperson Amanda Hernandez. On Thursday, she said 38 prisoners were still refusing food.

Hernandez said prisoners' commissary items were also being monitored, presumably to ensure men reporting to be on strike aren't eating packaged food they bought previously from the prison store. Prisoners have reported that their cells are routinely searched for food, according to Robertson.

The men are also dropping weight fast, according to a protesting prisoner. In a Friday message, a prisoner in the Coffield Unit said weigh-ins revealed that several men had lost five pounds or more in one day. He said many of the men were beginning to feel dizzy and have muscle cramps, according to a picture of the letter sent to The Texas Tribune.

According to prison policy, those participating in hunger strikes have to be medically evaluated daily, with the option for doctors to force-feed prisoners if it's deemed necessary. Hernandez said Thursday no medical intervention had yet been required for the strike.

Messages sent to protesting prisoners by the Tribune this week have not yet been answered. Robertson reported much of the prisoners' emails and letters have taken longer to receive than usual, which men suspect is in retaliation for their protest. Hernandez said the slowdown is because there has been an increase in mail, creating a backlog for internal reviews of prisoner communications.

Prison gangs, often organized by race, are notoriously dangerous and often deemed responsible for much violence behind bars. Still, indefinite solitary confinement has been increasingly criticized as disastrous for mental health, and international human rights standards deem it torture.

The protesters' proposed changes are similar to a settlement agreement reached in federal court in 2015 against California's solitary confinement practices. After a wide-scale, two-month hunger strike in 2013 and years of

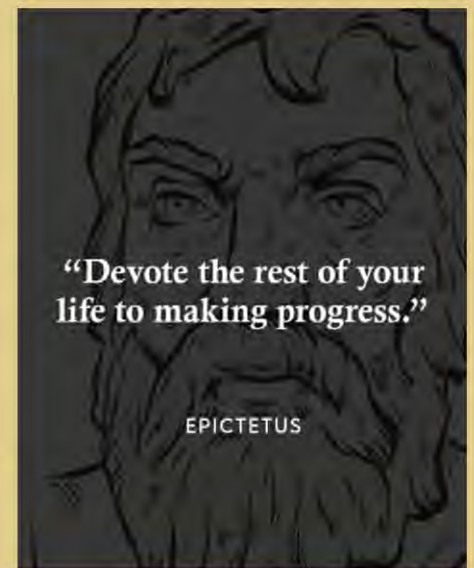
prisoner-led litigation, California agreed to no longer place people in solitary based only on their gang status and to no longer keep them in isolation indefinitely.

In Texas, the prisoners are also asking officials to shift from "gang-status" solitary placements to "behavior-based," and provide clear guidelines and firm timelines on how and when people in solitary would get out.

So far, TDCJ has not bowed, instead blaming the strike on an order from a member of the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas in federal prison. Hernandez said last week that the agency will not give gangs free rein to recruit new members.

Robertson dismissed TDCJ's conclusion, saying that many of the striking prisoners are members of Latino gangs and would not follow orders from the Aryan Brotherhood. Instead, she said, men from different gangs found a way to come together to fight for change.

Prison officials have also pointed out that gang members can get out of solitary by renouncing their gang and going through an intensive reentry program specifically for gang members. Many prisoners, however, struggle to get into the program or choose not to enter it, according to the striking prisoners and prison rights advocates, because it often requires them to name other gang members or incriminate themselves.



After Critics Called Texas Prison Food ‘Pig Slop’, State Plans to Get Rid of Worst Meals

By **Keri Blakinger** with **The Houston Chronicle** | January 20, 2023



The Texas prison system has a new goal: Serving slightly more edible food.

As part of a long-term strategic plan, the corrections agency aims to do away with the worst of prison fare — the meager and sometimes moldy brown-bag meals served during lockdowns, which occur regularly and can last for weeks.

Though lockdown meals have generated complaints for years, the public didn’t get a look at how awful they really were until 2020, when The Marshall Project and Hearst Newspapers published images of them captured with contraband phones. Afterward, the food improved in some prisons — but only for a short time, prisoners reported.

Now, though, the agency is making plans for more permanent improvements by starting a new culinary training program, in hopes of doing away with cold meals altogether.

“One of Texas Department of Criminal Justice’s goals for 2030 is to replace sack meals with nutritious, shelf-stable meals,” said Amanda Hernandez, the prison system spokesperson. To do that, Hernandez said, the agency will partner with the prison system’s in-house school district to “develop new Career and Technical Education courses in culinary arts that teach students about creating and distributing these types of meals.”

That effort will start with a pilot program to provide warm lockdown meals this spring at the Wallace and Ware units in West Texas, and at Stringfellow near Houston. Hernandez said it’s not clear when the program will expand across the state.

Advocates were cautiously optimistic about the plan.

“I’m really happy that TDCJ is actually looking into this and making an effort to move forward on a different path,” said Maggie Luna, policy analyst at the Texas Center for Justice & Equity, a nonprofit advocacy organization. Before going into policy work, Luna served time in Texas prisons, sometimes living on the cold bagged meals for weeks at a time.

“The food is so disgusting, I don’t know how much improvement they can make,” she said. “But I’d like to just see.”



Texas prison food has been poor since at least 2011, when officials dealt with a budget shortfall by chopping \$2.8 million out of the money set aside for feeding prisoners. That meant replacing hot dog and hamburger buns with white bread, switching to powdered milk from liquid, and feeding people only twice a day on the weekends at some facilities.

As the regular mess hall fare got worse, so did the lockdown meals. Whenever a Texas prison goes on lockdown — whether it’s because of an escape, a contraband search or a pandemic — the mess halls close and prisoners are confined to their bunks and cells. Bagged lunches known as “johnny sacks” replace cafeteria meals.

In theory, the johnnies include a bland breakfast — something like boiled eggs,

dry cereal and raisins — while lunch and dinner are usually two sandwiches each, sometimes with a side of prunes or corn bread. But what actually arrives in the cell door is not always identifiable and sometimes includes odd combinations, such as a single hot dog with no bun, a tortilla, a cup of mush and a raw potato. Prisoners report that there’s rarely a fresh vegetable in sight, the peanut butter is sometimes watered down with cooking oil, and the portions are paltry.

When COVID-19 hit, dozens of prisons locked down for months — and their residents began contacting the media with proof of the worsening conditions.

Weeks after The Marshall Project and Hearst Newspapers published their joint investigation in May 2020, the prison system’s deputy director for food responded by ordering kitchen staff to do better.

“If it isn’t something you would want to eat for 90 days, then don’t serve it to your unit,” Douglas Sparkman admonished kitchen managers in emails obtained by The Marshall Project. “When you make peanut butter sandwiches, don’t just put a blob of peanut butter and jelly in the middle of the bread and slap another one on top. Spread the peanut butter and jelly over the whole slice of bread.”

A few days later, Sparkman emailed again to share pictures of a moldy sandwich one worker found being served at a unit, something he described as a “common complaint.” “If there is mold on the bread, don’t make a sandwich with it,” he wrote.

At first, prisoners reported minor improvements: One man sent photos of his first fresh banana in recent memory.



But eventually, the lockdown fare returned to the normal slop.

Though advocates urged the legislature to boost food funding for the prison system last session, that did not happen. In fact, after adjusting for inflation, Texas prisons still spend less on food per prisoner than they did before the 2011 budget cuts.

The new plan could help ameliorate that. The agency's proposed budget, now in front of the state legislature — which officially gaveled in on Tuesday — includes only a slight increase in food funding, from \$95.3 million in the current fiscal year to \$98.8 million for next year.

But creating a vocational program will shift some of the new costs to the prison's school system. Prisoners will take courses through the prison system's Windham School District, where they will learn to flash freeze and seal food. The meals can be warmed and served later — hopefully while still hot and identifiable. Though the agency will pay for the food, storage and distribution, the school district will cover the educational and equipment costs.

But such a program will not make up for the legislature's failure to increase the food budget to cover inflation going back a decade, said Scott Henson, a prison policy expert and former director of the nonprofit advocacy organization Just Liberty.

"The idea that by 2030 we might feed prisoners better food than pig slop is a wonderful thought," he said. "But the reality is that TDCJ's good intentions do not matter in the least."

**"If the truth shall kill them,
let them die."**

— Immanuel Kant

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Insider News

Broken Work Program

By A TCCC Resident

Some department supervisors are not ensuring quality work from inmate workers and some inmate workers are getting free money from low/no quality work. Punching in and out is not a job nor is it quality work. Specifically, when the inmate population gets shitty meals, it is usually because the inmate workers do not put any quality into the food preparation. We also have janitors that do not clean the dorms and showers well, others that do/or don't do proper maintenance. We have just as many supervisors that do not care.

The work program can be an advantage to both the facility and inmate, it should be an advantage to the facility by hiring minimum wage workers instead of community prevailing wages. It should be an advantage to the inmate by offering treatment, skills, and income opportunity.

Work program supervisors need to hire inmate workers to do quality work and fire the inmate workers who do not do quality work. That multi-tiered failure results in very poor quality of life for the inmates in the facility. There is a limited opportunity in the inmate work program and it should not be taken advantage of by staff or inmates. There is a very limited funding for the inmate work program. In the spirit of the treatment, rehabilitation, and preparation for community re-entry.

It will continue to be taken advantage of until both inmates and staff know that low/no quality work will not be accepted and paid for. But, no one holds the supervisors accountable, so no one holds the inmates accountable.

Inmates are tired of sitting out of the work program because of the financial deficiencies and even more-so because of the wasted opportunity. We all want better living conditions and a better life for ourselves here. Given the opportunity with conditions to keep it, you'll see a big difference in every aspect of operations around this facility. [JEL]

Our Daily Bread

Juror Number 8

By **Tim Gustafson** | February 15, 2023

"One man is dead. Another man's life is at stake," says the judge somberly in the classic 1957 film *12 Angry Men*. The evidence against the young suspect appears overwhelming. But during deliberations, it's the brokenness of the jury that's exposed. One of the twelve-juror number 8-votes "not guilty." A heated debate ensues, in which the lone juror is mocked as he points out discrepancies in the testimony. Emotions escalate, and the jury members' own murderous and prejudicial tendencies come to light. One by one, the jurors switch their votes to not guilty.

When God gave His instructions to the new nation of Israel, He insisted on honest courage. "When you give testimony in a lawsuit," God said, "do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd" (EXODUS 23:2). Interestingly, the court was neither to "show favoritism to a poor person" (V. 3) nor to "deny justice to your poor people" (V.6). God, the righteous judge, desires our integrity in all our proceedings.

In *12 Angry Men*, the second juror to vote not guilty said of the first, "It's not easy to stand alone against the ridicule of others." Yet that's what God requires. Juror number 8 saw the real evidence, as well as the humanity of the individual on trial. With the gentle guidance of His Holy Spirit, we too can stand for God's truth and speak for the powerless.

What temps you to go along with the crowd? Where is God calling you to stand for truth and justice?

Father, help us show Your love to the world as we stand for Your truth.

