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D.C. Inmates 'Tortured,' Mothers Claim

One Accused Jail Guard Transferred, Council Told

By Karlyn Barker
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A group of mothers said yesterday that their sons were "beaten and tortured" by guards at the D.C. jail during several incidents last month in which they alleged that inmates were sprayed with Mace, stripped, blasted with water hoses and dragged from their cells and attacked out of the view of security cameras.

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Sabrina Wynn, testifying at a D.C. Council hearing on behalf of six mothers whose sons are jailed, called on the District to investigate the allegations and fire any corrections officers who are found to be responsible.

"If dogs were mistreated as our sons have been, those responsible would be prosecuted for animal cruelty," said Wynn, whose testimony came in a day-long hearing by the council's Judiciary Committee into the operations of the Department of Corrections.

The agency's interim director, S. Elwood York Jr., told the panel's chairman, Phil Mendelson (D-At Large), that the department's internal affairs division looked into the allegations and turned the investigation over to the U.S. attorney's office. He declined to comment further on the probe, except to say that one of the guards alleged to be a ringleader in the abuse has been reassigned.

Wynn and the other mothers, wearing T-shirts identifying themselves as Mothers United to Stop Torture, said they began receiving claims of inmate abuse late last month from their sons, other inmates, corrections officers and their sons' attorneys. The reports included incidents in which inmates allegedly were stripped; deprived of sink and toilet water; handcuffed and beaten; dragged from their cells and kicked by large groups of guards in riot gear; sprayed with high-pressure water hoses; and denied medical care or access to their families.

The inmates, in the South One cellblock, a high-security area, were "repeatedly Maced in the face and genitals while huddled in their cells," Wynn said. In some cases, inmates were "dragged to areas outside the view of video cameras to be beaten further."

This year, the corrections department installed 175 surveillance cameras throughout the jail to provide 24-hour monitoring and to serve as a deterrent to violence. The mothers, and their attorney, Douglas R. Sparks, said they have been unable to get copies of the videotapes.

Mendelson said he wrote to the corrections department this month, requesting copies of the surveillance tapes and asking for a detailed response to the allegations.

It was unclear yesterday whether such tapes exist.

York, who has been at the agency's helm for eight months, said the videotapes, "if any," are with the

U.S. attorney's office.

York told Mendelson that the department, with 906 full-time employees and a budget of more than \$121 million, has worked hard to improve security and food at the jail while cutting overtime costs. He said the agency faces a critical shortage in corrections officers and has begun an aggressive recruitment effort.

Mendelson questioned York about efforts to reduce the jail population and improve medical and educational services. The District and the agency have failed to comply with a 20-month-old law negotiated with the council to improve conditions and operations at the jail and to establish a cap on population to ease overcrowding. A recent inmate count put the number at more than 2,300.

York and others cited some programs aimed at improving services during and after incarceration as well as efforts to decrease the inmate population.

Said Darrin L. Bailey, a corrections officer: "We do an outstanding job with the resources we have."

But Philip Fornaci, executive director of the D.C. Prisoners' Legal Services Project, said chronic problems with overcrowding, medical services and "unabated" violence persist.

The agency, he said, "needs broad-based changes, beginning at the top and continuing through every level."

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