

Idaho prison officials ban use of so-called "dry cells"

By REBECCA BOONE, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Idaho's top prison official says the state will no longer house inmates in so-called dry cells — a type of cell without beds, sinks or toilets — and that all other segregated housing in the state's prisons is under review.

The Tuesday evening announcement comes in the wake of criticism raised in a long-running lawsuit by a mental health expert and inmates. They said the Correction Department's use of the dry cells to control inmates who were actively trying to hurt themselves or others was barbaric and inhumane. According to testimony in a recent hearing, the dry cells were also occasionally used to punish mentally ill inmates who disobeyed.

Idaho Department of Correction Director Kevin Kempf said research shows that segregation often does more harm than good, making any existing mental health problem worse and potentially causing long-term psychological damage.

"Frankly it feels like we can come up with an alternative way to protect inmates, fellow inmates and staff and not utilize a cell that has nothing in it but a drain," Kempf said.

Kempf said the timing was right to make the changes — segregation reform is a significant issue with the Association of State Correctional Administrators, Kempf said, and he's been watching how other states are reforming their use of segregation cells.

Idaho has a total of 11 dry cells at the Idaho State Correctional Institution and the Idaho Maximum Security Institution near Boise. St. Anthony work camp has a dry cell with a bed that was mainly used for holding inmates for short periods of time while they waited to be taken to another facility, and there may be a few more at other prisons in the state.

Kempf said none of the cells would be used until they are retrofitted with beds, sinks, toilets and water.

About 515 of Idaho's 7,536 prison beds are in segregation cells. Inmates who are a threat to other inmates or staffers or who have other behavior problems can be placed in long-term administrative segregation, where they are seen every 30 minutes by a staff member but otherwise isolated from fellow inmates. Administrative segregation inmates and death row inmates are kept in their cells 23 hours a day, and given the option of spending one hour a day in a cell-sized recreation cage outside.

Disciplinary segregation may be used for inmates who break prison rules, Kempf said. Those inmates can be kept in segregation for up to 30 days, unless a warden approves a longer segregation period.

Prisoners may also be placed in short-term segregation while correctional officers investigate rule violations, Kempf said.

"We're asking ourselves, does it work, are there areas of improvement, who are currently in those beds," Kempf said.

Depending on the findings from the review, some of the segregation cells could be converted into regular housing units, the director said.

Deputy Chief of Prisons Ashley Dowell said that though in the past some suicidal inmates were placed in dry cell cells, segregation is not part of the department's treatment policy for prisoners with suicidal thoughts or attempts.

"Those folks aren't placed on restrictive housing, they're placed on bed watch or close observation watch, closely watched by clinical staff to determine their level of acuity and well-being," Dowell said.

Close observation cells might not have light fixtures or other things that a noose could be affixed to, but do have beds, running water and toilets, she said.

Neither the attorneys representing the inmates in the lawsuit nor officials with the ACLU of Idaho immediately returned calls seeking comment from The Associated Press.

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