

# SHEDDING LIGHT ON CMUS

Over the past two years, the United States Federal Bureau of Prisons has quietly opened at least two new prison units that severely restrict inmates' ability to communicate with the outside world. These units were opened either without the legally required public comment period or, there is good reason to believe, in spite of it. In April 2006, the Bureau proposed a strict new set of regulations for people involved with (not necessarily convicted in) investigations of "terrorism," and a public comment period followed. After a strong outcry from civil liberties advocates, the proposal appeared to be dropped. In December 2006, however, several men – almost all of whom were Arab Muslims – were moved from the prisons in which they had been residing to a new "Communications Management Unit" (CMU) housed at the U.S. Penitentiary in Terre Haute, which looked remarkably like the unit that the Bureau had proposed<sup>1</sup>. There was no public comment period for the CMU.

In May of 2008, several men were moved without warning to what is believed to be the second CMU in the federal prison system – this one located at the US Penitentiary in Marion, IL. Again, none of these men were given any notice that they would be moved, and it was not until they arrived at the CMU there that there was any public acknowledgment that the CMU existed. The rules at the second CMU are the same as those at Terre Haute. One striking difference is that there are at least two non-Arab men in residence – both Daniel McGowan and Andy Stepanian are white.

Once the news broke that the facilities had opened, CMU's came under immediate criticism for segregating inmates on the basis of religion and ethnicity and for punishing low-risk inmates by almost eliminating their ability to talk on the phone to loved ones, see them in person, or correspond to them through letters in a timely fashion. Inmates at the CMU's are

allowed only one phone call per week, which is limited to 15 minutes, and which must be conducted in English. All mail that is sent or received is scrutinized and any mail written in languages other than English must be translated and transcribed before it is sent or received by an inmate. Visits take place behind glass and are limited to four hours each month. They must also be conducted in English. These restrictions are devastating to all of the inmates, who now have almost no contact with loved ones and very little ability to keep up with events in the outside world; the restrictions are particularly damaging to those whose first language is not English.

The U.S. Bureau of prisons continues to have very little to say publicly about the CMU's. The information we have is based on a few investigative articles about the CMU at Terre Haute<sup>1,2</sup> and on what we have learned from the inmates themselves. We need to know more. We need to know what is happening inside federal institutions that hold over 200,000 inmates and which may or may not be following the regulations that govern them. Please encourage local media in your area to investigate – especially if you live near a federal correctional institution. Write letters to the editor and talk to your friends.

1. Van Bergen, Jennifer. "Documents show new secretive US prison program isolating Muslim, Middle Eastern prisoners." *The Raw Story*. 16 February, 2007. [http://www.rawstory.com/news/2007/Documents\\_show\\_new\\_secretive\\_new\\_US\\_0216.html](http://www.rawstory.com/news/2007/Documents_show_new_secretive_new_US_0216.html).

2. Eggen, Dan. "Facility Holding Terrorism Inmates Limits Communication." *Washington Post*. 25 February, 2007.

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