DU Law Professor Goes to Washington for Program on Solitary Confinement Practices

Professor Laura Rovner has been wrangling with prison officials in Colorado over solitary confinement practices for years. In April, she takes that fight to Washington, D.C.

Rovner is scheduled to speak April 6 in a United States Congressional Office Building at a briefing titled “The Abuses of Solitary Confinement in the U.S. Criminal Justice.” The briefing, followed by a viewing of a documentary about prison conditions, is hosted by the American Civil Liberties Union and Reps. John Conyers (D-Mich.), Robert C. “Bobby” Scott (D-Va.), and Cedric Richmond (D-La.).

Working with the law school’s Student Law Office civil rights clinical program, Rovner has helped students in recent years sue the federal Supermax prison over the isolation of inmate Tommy Silverstein, who has been locked in solitary confinement since 1983. Her students have also sued Colorado prisons over the treatment of inmates.

She credits the ACLU for getting Congress’ attention. It was through her work with the group that she was invited to present to the lawmakers.

“Happily, the ACLU has decided at a national level to really prioritize the issue of solitary confinement and ending it particularly in situations of mental illness or juveniles,” Rovner says.

In particular, Rovner and her students have questioned the often arbitrary nature of the punishment and the vague rules that frustrate inmates’ and their attorneys’ attempts to work through the system and get them back into general prison population. She says she hopes the presentations and the attention paid by lawmakers will lead to some national legislation.

According to an ACLU announcement of the April 6 program, tens of thousands of prisoners in the country are held in solitary confinement every day, locked up for 23 hours each day without human contact.

“This briefing will examine the detrimental impacts of the abusive use or over-use of solitary confinement, including its disproportionate impact on inmates of color, the appropriateness of its use on mentally ill inmates, and other concerns about its use by correctional facilities,” the ACLU states in its release.

Other speakers expected at the program include Michael Randle, program manager for the Judge Nancy R. McDonnell Community Based Correctional Facility; Robert King, the only freed member of the so-called “Angola 3,” released in 2001 after 29 years in Solitary Confinement in Angola Prison in Louisiana; David Fathi, director of American Civil Liberties Union’s National Prison Project; and Tory Pegram, campaign coordinator for the International Coalition to Free the Angola 3.  

—Chase Squires