

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS FROM SURVIVORS
OF PRISON SEXUAL ASSAULTS

Finally, we will hear from Mr. Keith DeBlasio.

MR. DEBLASIO: Mr. Chairman, members of the commission, my name is Keith DeBlasio and I'm here to tell you today about what happened to me while I was incarcerated in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. After being convicted of a nonviolent securities offense, I was sent to FCI Morgantown. Instead of a formal youth facility, Morgantown is a minimum security facility with no fence. Places like Morgantown are used for individuals with relatively no risk of violence, escape or predatory behavior.

As an inmate at Morgantown, I witnessed correction officials breaking the rules of the institution and I reported them. Because of my reports, the prison officials retaliated against me by holding me in solitary segregation, by falsely accusing me of misconduct on charges that were later proven to be false and, finally, I suppose as a last resort, by transferring me to a high risk

security facility in Milan, Michigan.

At the time FCI Milan was a facility often

used for more unmanageable inmates in the mid Atlantic region. It had a history of gang activity, large scale riots, violent and predatory assaults. I was being sent to a place known to be dangerous simply for speaking out. I was worried about what might happen to me there, but I honestly had no idea how bad it would turn out to be.

I tried to protest the decision to transfer me and I asked not to be housed in the dangerous dormitory style housing at Milan, but I was placed in a double dormitory with about 150 inmates, dozens of blind spots and only one officer on duty at any given time.

It was here that my nightmare began. It was here that I was sexually assaulted by the same assailant more times than I can even count. Today one of the things that disturbs me the most is that before the abuse began, I told the officials that I felt vulnerable in the open dormitory unit and I told the officials that I felt threatened by the assailant. My assailant was a leader in a gang called the Vice Lords and he was known for being

violent.

When he began to threaten and harass me, I told prison officials, but the prison officials did nothing. After serving three days in segregation for brutally assaulting another inmate in a stairwell, he was released and assigned to my dormitory. That was when the repeated assaults began. He threatened to stab me and he raped me.

There were numerous assaults and a long period of ongoing abuse, especially after prison officials moved my assailant into the same cubicle with me as my bunk mate. I couldn't defend myself because he had fellow gang members standing watch. I knew that if I reported him, I would face repercussions from the other gang members and no action was being taken by officials. I felt there was no escape.

Another man had reported the abuse before me, and instead of finding safety, he was put in a recreation cage alone with this rapist, all while under protective custody. So I had just cause for staying silent.

Unfortunately, my story does not end there.

Eventually, I became very ill. My illness was mysterious, swollen lymph nodes, vomiting, diarrhea, weakness, dizziness and scabs on my skelp. Medical staff could not identify the illness and so I spoke with my personal physician and friend at home and she prompted me to ask for an HIV screening.

Permission to take the HIV test took quite some time. It was only after a lengthy grievance process and calls from the outside physician and my family members that an HIV test is performed. Sure enough, I was determined to be HIV positive and extensive tripple therapy was begun, which would be the life long ordeal.

Later I found out that prison officials knew the assailant was emotionally disturbed, on psychotropic medications, a repeat predator with serious mental problems, and yet they did nothing to protect me. In fact, they assisted.

I was a nonviolent offender, but I was given a life sentence. I was repeatedly denied protection from a known predator with HIV.

I've gone through a lot of different stages emotionally and physically when it comes to dealing with the HIV that I contracted while behind bars. One of the challenges that I still deal with is the neuropathy that comes along with the HIV and some of the medications that I take.

I have lots of problems with my medication. Many mornings I wake up nauseated and spend hours with vomiting or dry heaves. Yet even though the medication makes me sick, it's what keeps me from developing full blown aids and passing away. I'm now on disability. Between medications and other HIV related complications, I've had a very hard time working. In order it stay healthy, I need to be able to work on my own schedule and partially out of my home. Because of these restrictions caused by my HIV positive status, and the need for constant medical treatment, it has been all but impossible for me to even work a partial work week.

It has pretty much done me in financially. My medication alone costs \$1,800 a month, which does not include doctor or hospital visits.

Medical insurance in place of Medicaid is of no real assistance since I won't be covered by any insurance company for preexisting conditions. I receive some help from my family and now that I'm on disability, I have some funds to pay for what I need. Yet the disability didn't kick in until July of 2004 when I was released in 2001. In the meantime I went into debt to get medication, treatment and simple living expenses.

Sexual abuse behind bars has scared me mentally and emotionally. Years of therapy, both behind bars and outside in the community have helped me a great deal with coping, but what happened to me is something that affects me to this day.

I suffer from anxiety associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. Large crowds have become a source of anxiety for me. Even being buried in the sand at the beach, something I used to look upon fondly as a child growing up in Florida, triggers anxious fears of confinement.

When I think about it, it is this disease that

I am left with that makes me feel the most violated. Even though I am free and far from the abuser and the institution, the nightmare not over. Every day I wake up with the reality of my illness. Constant side affects of medications, the progressive neuropathy and the uncertainty of knowing whether my viral lobe may climb and my immune system may fail, the pain, fear and the anger will be with me all always.

The judge sentenced me to five years of confinement under the custody of the Bureau of Prisons. Why did I receive a life sentence and why doesn't anyone have to answer for their actions? At this point, I can only ask why. And to the members of this commission, for many of us here and not here across this country, you're our only vision of hope for some type of justice and I thank you.

THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you also, Mr. DeBlasio, for your testimony.