

## I'm Paralyzed From the Collarbone Down, and My Time in Prison Revealed a System That Robs Prisoners of Their Rights and Dignity



By Dean Westwood

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TAGS: [Solitary Confinement](#), [Prisoners' Rights](#)

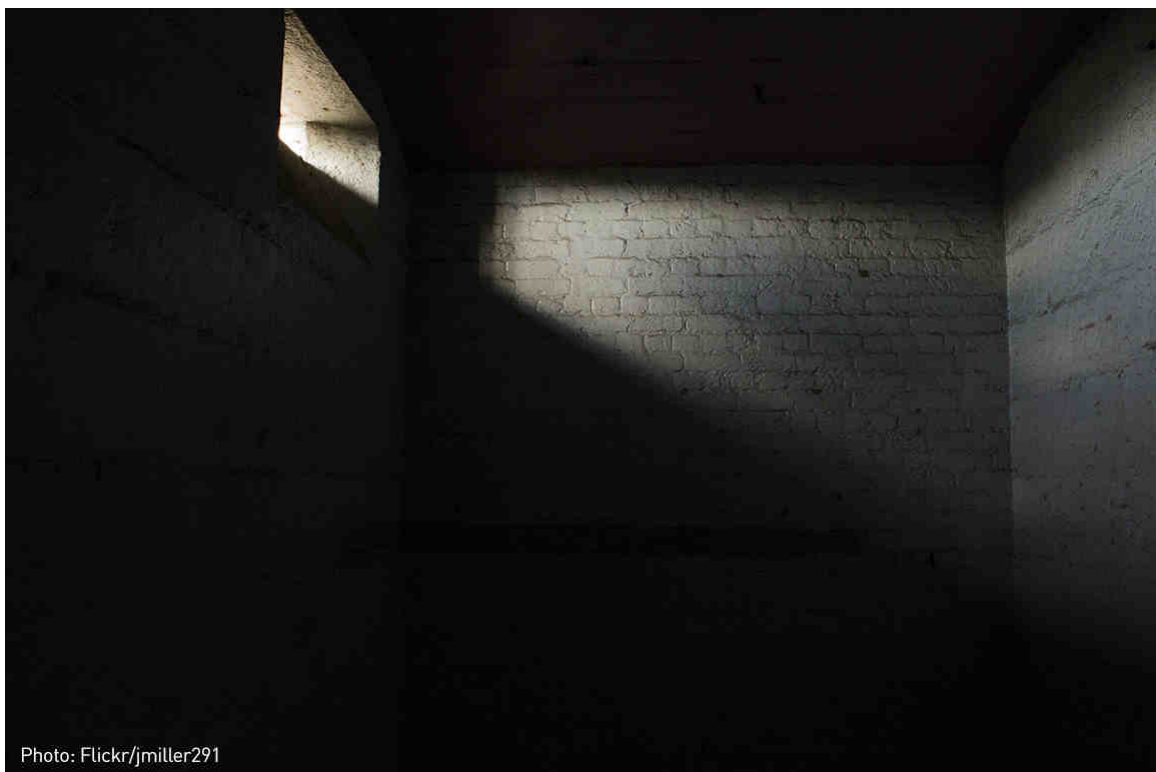


Photo: Flickr/jmiller291

I have a spinal cord injury in my neck, which rendered me paralyzed from the collarbone down. When I was sentenced to prison, my physical disability should have been taken into account by the corrections officers and staff. But

it wasn't. Instead I was deprived basic care and necessary services, which put my health at risk and caused me great harm.

While incarcerated with the Oregon Department of Corrections, I was needlessly isolated in an infirmary at three different institutions, despite having no medical condition that would warrant my being confined there. In the first institution, I was confined to my cell for 23 to 24 hours a day, which didn't immediately make sense. I didn't break any rules, and I was classified at the lowest security level.

While I was confined to the infirmary, they were aware of the medications I needed due to my disability, but they withheld them from me. They denied me a medication that keeps my bladder sphincter closed, so I don't urinate on myself. I didn't get that, so I uncontrollably urinated all over myself on a regular basis. They denied me the medication that keeps my body from locking up in terrible muscle spasms. Without it, my entire body would spasm like a fish out of water squeezing the air from my lungs as I lay helplessly on my bunk. When I asked why they weren't giving me the medication I needed to maintain my basic health, the staff told me they wanted me to "have a holiday from my medications."

In the second institution, I wasn't allowed access to the yard. Instead I was only allowed to spend a little time on a 15-square-foot slab of cement with 20-foot-tall walls and a metal grate over the top. Despite repeated requests, I wasn't allowed to participate in any programs that would reduce my sentence like inmates that did not have a disability were allowed to do. I wasn't allowed to work to generate any money for commissary or to call my family. I was repeatedly harmed by inmate orderlies required to provide my assistance but had no training.

At the third institution, I was confined to a dorm-like infirmary where I was assaulted by nondisabled inmates. I again was not allowed access to the yard. After a surgery on my spinal cord, I was denied physical therapy critical to my recovery and long-term health in violation of my neurosurgeon's direct

instructions. It became apparent to me that I was being punished and damaged not because of my crime but because of my physical disability.

When I asked why I was being confined to the infirmary and isolated, the response was, “We will put you where we want when we want.” My injury took away some of my abilities. But it was the prison staff that assaulted my humanity.

The Oregon Department of Corrections isn't architecturally or programmatically capable of caring for any prisoner with a physical disability. Oregon State Penitentiary was built in the 1800s, and its structures were literally crumbling around us. The inmate orderlies who assisted me were ignorant of how to properly assist someone with a severe physical disability, and they were never trained. The facility and its staff are both culpable.

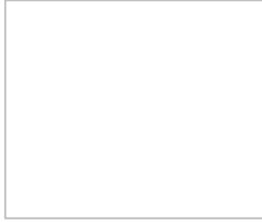
We need to address the incalculable harm done physically and mentally to incarcerated people with disabilities. To start, we must track how people with physical disabilities are treated so that we have the information that will guide and power reform. Then both state and federal legislators must work with prisoners' rights advocates, prisoners, prosecutors, and judges to reform the system so that its inherent biases are erased and prisoners with physical disabilities are not put in jeopardy simply because of their disability.

Reform is the only way to protect prisoners in our nation who are under constant threat. It's their legal right to be protected. It's our moral obligation to enact the reforms necessary to ensure those protections.

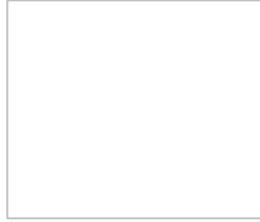
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