

Religious groups push for action against prison rape

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Six months before she was scheduled to be released on drug charges, Marilyn Shirley was raped in 2000 by a guard at the Texas prison where she was serving time. "I am still haunted by the words he whispered in my ear," Shirley recently recounted. "Do you think you're the only one?" her attacker asked her.

A wide spectrum of religious leaders and civil rights advocates say Shirley is far from being the only one and are pressing the Department of Justice to implement national standards to help prevent an estimated 60,000 cases of prison rape each year.

"What we are witnessing is justice denied," said Tim Goeglein, vice president of external relations at Focus on the Family and one of the signers of a letter to Attorney General Eric Holder. Other signers included representatives of the Southern Baptist Convention, the National Association of Evangelicals and Sojourners, as well as the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ, the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Immigrant Justice Center.

Focus on the Family officials worry that the scars of rape could persist once prisoners return home. "Millions of young people in America have one or two parents in prison," Goeglein said.

United Methodist clergy who minister in prisons encounter the problem, said Bill Mefford, director of civil and human rights for the UMC's General Board of Church and Society. "Our people care about this," he said.

The standards, proposed last year, would subject correctional facilities to audits and establish a protocol for handling rape in their facilities. According to the 2003 Prison Rape Elimination Act, the standards were supposed to be enacted by Holder by June of this year. They have already been adopted by California and Oregon without significant additional costs, according to Pat Nolan, vice president of Prison Fellowship.

Many of the same groups that are now pushing Holder worked to pass the act, which pushed for better data on prison rapes and established the National Prison Rape Elimination Commission, an independent oversight body.

Department of Justice spokesperson Hannah August said the department is working diligently and plans to send the approved standards to the Office of Management and Budget this fall. Holder explained the delay in a March letter to the House Appropriations Committee. "We want to make sure that we get this right," he wrote, acknowledging that it is an urgent issue. "This is something that I think needs to be done, not tomorrow, but yesterday." —RNS