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The Forgotten Floor - CBS4 I-Team Investigation

Part 1

Shocking Conditions Revealed At Miami-Dade's Jail



Michele Gillen
Reporting

(CBS4 News) MIAMI You can hear the cries from the hallway, through plexiglas and solid steel doors.

"I can't breathe in here, I can't breathe. Take me out. I can't breathe," cries the inmate from his cell.

Prison insiders call this the forgotten floor, but it seems unimaginable that the horrendous and horrifying conditions of a jail spilling over with the mentally ill could be erased from any sane man's mind.

"I am butt naked, laying on the dirty floor. This is ain't right," one inmate told CBS4 Chief Investigative Reporter Michele Gillen.

Some beg for help, for the barest of necessities. Some ask for water, but the faucets are dry.

"The water is not working," one inmate told the I-Team. "He is drinking sewer water out of the toilet."

In stench filled cells designed for one person, outfitted with only a single steel shelf for a bed, two, three, sometimes even five men, diagnosed with mental illness and many arrested for minor crimes, are locked up for days, weeks or months.

Said one inmate, "I want the public to know that people are urinating on the floor and we have to sleep on top of it. They are defecating on the floor and we are sleeping on top of it. There is only one bunk and it is made of steel."

He said four people were living in the cell at that time. They are only allowed out of their cell for 15 minutes, two times a week.

"This is it," says Miami-Dade Judge Stephen Leifman. "Lights are on 24/7. The conditions you see just do not change."

"I have been to Vietnam. I have been in Vietnam for 18 months. I was in Vietnam," an inmate of this facility told the I-Team. "It's worse, this, being here. I wouldn't put a dog in here. My dog, I wouldn't put my dog in here."

This is not a draconian penitentiary in some far away land. In the shadow of the Miami skyline, in the heart of the city, it is the Miami-Dade Pre-Trial Detention Center -- the downtown jail, where we found a dark secret.

"Unfortunately we are treating people with chronic mental illnesses like we did in the 16 and 17 hundreds," said Dr. Joseph Portier, the jail's chief psychiatrist. "You read about how people in asylums in prison during that time.

You would think that in 2006 we would treat people with chronic illness in a much better, more humane way, but unfortunately we are reverting back to how we treated people back in the 16 and 17 hundreds. It is terrible. It is morally incomprehensible. "

That sentiment is echoed by an outraged Miami-Dade County Judge, Stephen Leifman.

"The time bomb is about to go off," he told the CBS4 I-Team. "And that's our big concern right now. You can see, feel the tension in here because of the volume of people."

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"When outsiders do come here and see this it is very shocking," Urbistondo said, "that they are being treated this way, but this is what we have and it's how its been going on for 25 years" -- Michael Urbistondo, Corrections Officer.



Mentally ill inmates at the Miami-Dade jail lying on the floor, as multiple inmates are placed in a cell designed for a single person.



mates in the mentally-ill ward at the Miami-Dade attempt to drink water from a toilet, after claiming there was no water in their cell.

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mate speaking about brutal conditions at Miami-Dade's cells for the mentally ill, talking through a grate in his door.

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The Miami-Dade Pre-Trial Detention Facility, where mentally ill inmates are held.

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