



Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition (MPAC)
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Advocate group holds strategy session to strengthen focus on Maine prison reform

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MANCHESTER -- The Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition, a statewide organization committed to ethical and humane changes in the state's prison system, met Saturday to move ahead with strategies to support prison reform and educate the public and media about persistent failures in Maine prisons and jails.

The group has been working for three years on specific problems, with a focus on the need for transparency in any reported abuse in Maine's prisons, especially on the deaths of prisoners while in state custody. Participants include the Maine Civil Liberties Union, Maine Council of Churches, Maine Psychological Association, NAACP, and other advocacy groups working on legislation to end the use and abuse of solitary confinement in Maine, among other prison-reform efforts.

Now M-PAC is organizing new goals in addition to ongoing projects and is recruiting help from volunteers and working to establish a strategy to respond quickly to prison crises.

M-PAC is comprised of individuals throughout Maine, prisoners, their families, former legislators, attorneys, religious leaders, social agencies, and others committed to positive, humane, and cost-saving policies and practices at Maine's county jails and state prisons.

In addition to the issue of solitary confinement, M-PAC has worked to

improve prison policies ensuring that inmates are treated humanely and that sick inmates receive the treatment they need.

Group members attending Saturday's 3-hour strategy session underscored the need for more transparency and accountability as a key requisite to positive prison reform in Maine.

David Bidler of Portland, a spokesman for the coalition, cited the recent suicide of an inmate at Two Bridges Regional Jail in Wiscasset as an example of how little attention the public and media seem to give Maine prisoners and their families.

A still-unidentified male inmate hung himself on Oct. 3 at the Wiscasset jail, yet his death apparently was not even reported until Oct. 14. The death of this man, who tried to hang himself a week earlier, is under investigation.

Meanwhile, M-PAC members helped bring pressure to the Attorney General's Office to investigate the suspicious death of Victor Valdez of Portland, a sickly prisoner who died in November 2009 at the Maine State Prison in Warren, allegedly as a result of abuse from prison guards.

The AG's Office has yet to release its findings in the Valdez investigation.

The coalition also continues to seek more information on the brutal circumstances surrounding the death of Sheldon Weinstein, whose death resulted in the firing and demotion of prison officers.

"We need more transparency," says Judy Garvey of Blue Hill, a spokeswoman for M-PAC. "There is so much darkness surrounding the treatment of Maine prisoners, especially when they die while in state custody."

Among those attending the M-PAC strategy meeting Saturday at the I.B.E.W. hall in Manchester were Emily Posner of Montville and a law student in New Orleans; Jim Bergin of Blue Hill, a post-release mentor and former book publisher, and Stan Moody of Manchester, a former MSP chaplain and state representative.

Both Posner and Moody were recognized Friday by the MCLU for their commitment to improving the treatment of prisoners in Maine.

For more information on the group, visit the coalition's website at www.maineprisoneradvocacy.org.

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In addition to Judy Garvey and David Bidler, please contact Liz Mockler at Dirigo News Service (lizmockler@hotmail.com) if you have questions or concerns about this news release. Thanks.