The Voice of the Silenced

In February 2019, the law firm I work for acquired a personal injury case involving an inmate who suffered a dog bite injury to his left thigh next to his groin, by a K-9 trained to detect contraband at the Elkhart County Work Release Center. Our client reported that while he was in a lineup, a guard slipped something into his pocket before signaling the dog to attack. My boss and I were skeptical about this claim, so we requested the lineup video footage. After reviewing the surveillance, it became clear our client was credible. His small personal injury case turned into a civil rights violation against the county. While researching, we came across the New York Times article “I’m Going to Die Here,’ She Told the Guards. They Didn’t Listen.”

The article detailed how inmate, Laminika Dockery, arrived at the Elkhart County Work Release Center on July 25, 2018, only to die six days later at the age of 36, on July 31, 2018 from sepsis likely caused by a perforated ulcer. Dockery was denied medical attention when she requested an ER visit after having severe stomach pain for two days. Officers dismissed her complaints, claiming they were those of a drug user. Dockery failed a drug test upon arrival; testing positive for benzodiazepine, amphetamine, and methamphetamines. However, withdraw from such substances doesn’t cause vomiting, which Dockery was doing. Dockery was written-up for disobedience when she collapsed or refused to get up from the fetal position. At one point, a guard instructed her to seek out a caseworker for help. When she did, she was accused of lying and sent to confinement. The pain became too unbearable for Dockery to remain silent, so she
was placed in solitary confinement for disturbing the other inmates. Dockery banged on her cell
door out of protest, and a guard, in his own words, stated, “I spun Dockery to her stomach and
proceeded to shackle her and double lock the shackles. I ordered her to sit on her bunk and calm
down.”

None of the employees were charged for the negligence that resulted in Dockery’s death.
Elkhart County Prosecutor, Vicki Becker, stated “If you look at it objectively and logically, there
is no criminal law in Indiana that would appropriately address what went on.” These cases prompted
me to brainstorm how similar situations should be handled in the future, and I came up with the
following:

First, I need to interview as many inmates as possible, who were
mistreated in correctional facilities throughout the United States and
preserve their testimonies in writing, including publishing their stories
in newspapers to raise awareness among the community of what’s
happening to these inmates within correction facilities; and

Second, I need to organize a non-profit organization made up of
volunteers, victims, private social workers who don’t work for the state,
and a powerful legal team, that will litigate these civil rights violation
cases for inmates to sue for damages. This non-profit organization’s
purpose is to raise money for inmate health care expenses; counsel
inmates; provide legal assistance; and raise public awareness about the
cruel treatment inmates experience in correctional facilities throughout
the U.S.; and
Third, this non-profit organization needs to get involved politically by meeting with congressional committees and state legislators in order to get legislation passed that clarifies the responsibilities that federal, state, and county facilities have when working with dependents of the state; including stronger protections against negligence, and stricter reporting requirements, akin to laws now governing mandatory reporting of child abuse.

I will begin shedding light on how inmates are treated in the Elkhart County Work Release Center, which is a harsh reminder of what’s happening in several correctional facilities throughout the U.S. Unfair punishments, intentional battery to inmates by guards, and negligence resulting in inmates’ death is all-too-common throughout the American criminal justice system. Ordinary citizens need to stand up and be the voice for these inmates, who are silenced by their status as inmates. I will not stop seeking out inmates who are victims of this treatment. They all deserve to have their stories told and I will make it happen by publishing them in local newspapers and beyond. It is my hope that raising awareness among the community and telling other inmates’ stories will spark an investigation into the Elkhart County Work Release Center and connect me to others who share my concerns and are ready to fight with me for legislation to protect all inmates.