

# Join the Fight for Trans Prisoners' Rights!

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*Transgender prisoners are routinely denied their most basic human rights in California's prisons. Meanwhile, activists, lawyers and advocates, uninformed about the issues these prisoners face, have done little to address their needs...until now.*

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by Delphine Brody

In recent years, as transgender, transsexual and gender-variant people's struggle for universal freedom of gender identity and expression has gained visibility, the trans liberation movement has taken shape, grown and evolved. Yet, by and large, our movement has ignored the rising tide of police harassment and attacks on the most marginalized people in our community—poor and low-income trans people, especially trans women of color and trans immigrants—many of whom must rely on prostitution and other illegal work to survive. While more privileged trans activists wax philosophical about gender theory in internet chatrooms and lobby politicians for hate crimes laws and employee benefits packages, low-income trans women of color on the streets are fighting for their lives, amidst an unprecedented epidemic of police violence. Charged with “crimes” of poverty and desperation, more and more trans people are doing hard time in prison.

Inside California's state prisons, trans and gender-variant prisoners have begun to break the silence and demand justice in the face of severe repression. Under the ever-present threat of retaliation, trans prisoners are speaking out about the many egregious, often life-threatening human rights violations they have suffered at the hands of the California Department of Corrections (CDoC). These courageous trans prisoners have cited routine and systematic abuse by CDoC officials and guards, including the deliberate withholding of hormones and other essential medications, refusal to address trans prisoners by their preferred names and gender pronouns, prohibiting trans prisoners from wearing or possessing gender-appropriate clothing, undergarments and other items that they require for personal comfort, and housing trans prisoners in prisons of their assigned sex at birth (often at odds with their gender identity), where they are subjected to frequent harassment, threats, physical and sexual violence from guards and other inmates. If trans prisoners complain about this treatment, they are often punished by being placed in solitary confinement, where they are even more vulnerable to attacks by guards.

Over the course of their regular community health outreach work, advocates Judy Greenspan, Beth Feinberg and Kevin Weaver from the HIV/Hepatitis C in Prison (HIP) Committee have visited prisons such as the California Medical Facility in Vacaville, Corcoran State Prison and the Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla, where they have met trans prisoners and heard shocking accounts of medical neglect and sexual abuse. In addition, trans and gender-variant former prisoners in our community have shared their stories of harassment and intimidation, confirming our suspicions that this population is being singled out by prison guards and officials for selective punishment.

Inspired by the incredible bravery of these trans prisoners in their determined struggle for dignity and respect, the HIP Committee is starting a pilot project focusing on

the needs of prisoners who identify as transgender (TG), transsexual (TS), queens, girls, two-spirits, trans men, female-to-males (FTMs), butches, daddies, bulldaggers, and anyone who has been harassed or attacked because of their gender-variant appearance, gender expression, the shape of their genitals or other body parts, their medical history, or the sex they were assigned at birth.

## **Building a Movement**

Our new group is still forming, and we are seeking former prisoners, members of the trans community and allies. We hope to begin to bridge the divide between trans and gender-variant people on the outside and those on the inside, through mail-in questionnaires, prison outreach visits, and developing effective strategies for advocacy.

We are seeking submissions from current and former trans prisoners in the form of writing and artwork that we can publish in *Prison Focus* and eventually in our own newsletter, including input into the process of forming our group and building the movement. With your permission, we may also display your artwork in prison art shows and read your poems and stories on the radio, to raise awareness of the urgent need for folks on the outside to support trans prisoners' human rights. Our goal is to build a grassroots movement to demand justice for all trans prisoners and put an end to the widespread violence and discrimination.

*To submit writing or artwork, to get involved in this project, or for more information, write to: California Prison Focus/ HIP Committee, 2940 16th St., Suite 307, San Francisco, CA 94103, Attn: Delphine Brody. Or call us at (415) 252-9211. Our next meeting will be Thursday, July 19, at 7 PM. Please call us for directions.*