

East and South Bay jails under spotlight amid inmate allegations of inhumane treatment



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OAKLAND — Last month, more than 100 inmates at Glenn E. Dyer Correctional Facility in Oakland went on a five-day hunger strike to protest what they called inhumane conditions, including prolonged solitary confinement, dirty clothing and poor quality food.

Before it was over, the action spread to Santa Rita Jail in Dublin, the Santa Clara County Main Jail in San Jose and Elmwood Correctional Facility in Milpitas. The actions and claims of mistreatment have shined a spotlight into the hidden inner world of facilities that house both state and federal prisoners in the Bay Area.

“It’s a movement and I would expect this to happen in more county jails as well,” said Jose Valle, a community organizer with Silicon Valley De-Bug, an activist group that helped organize the inmate hunger strikes in Santa Clara County. “It’s been a long time coming.”

Inmate unrest has caught fire in Contra Costa County as well. At the West County Detention Facility, federal immigration detainees alleged that they have been denied access to bathrooms and forced to relieve themselves in bags or clothes in their cells.

Now local and state officials are calling for an investigation of the detention center in North Richmond, which has a \$6 million annual contract with U.S. Marshals Service to house federal detainees awaiting hearings or deportatio

After a report in the San Francisco Chronicle that a 38-year-old female detainee at the jail suffered such deplorable conditions that she was begging to be deported back to Honduras, state Sen. Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley, sent a letter this week to Attorney General Xavier Becerra calling for his office to investigate.

“Such allegations would certainly rise to the level of a civil rights violation and merit review by the attorney general’s office,” Skinner wrote, referring to the report that women were being forced to urinate and defecate in cells with no toilets.

Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia said the sheriff’s department had committed to “a full and thorough investigation of conditions at the jail,” with results expected next month.

“The allegations we heard, if true, are totally unacceptable and deserve immediate correction,” Gioia said.

In Alameda County, Prisoners United, a coalition of inmates who conducted the hunger strikes there have submitted five demands to the sheriff’s department, calling for, an “end the practice of indefinite solitary confinement; subjective grievance practices; abuse of discretion to lockdown; insufficient and unsanitary clothing; and insufficient food and starvation for indigent prisoners.”

Alameda County Sheriff’s officials have denied that jail conditions violate state law.

“We will look to see where we can improve on some of those things but to be honest I don’t think we are going to see a whole lot of concessions,” sheriff’s spokesman Ray Kelly said Wednesday. “When you run one of the largest jails in the country, there is a lot of oversight and we wouldn’t be operating at all if we were doing what is alleged in those five points.”

Alameda County also has a contract with the U.S. Marshal’s Service to provide beds at a per diem rate to people charged with federal offenses and people awaiting a hearing on their immigration status or deportation. On Thursday, activists and family members of Glenn Dyer inmates are planning a rally at the Alameda County Board of Supervisors’ Public Protection Committee meeting where sheriffs department officials will present an update on the inmates’ grievances. Activists want the supervisors to demand the sheriff’s department take action to improved conditions at the jail

Inmates and activists have taken particular issue with the jail's policy of administrative segregation — confining an inmate to a single cell for up to 23 hours a day.

“We are allowed only the minimum of 3 hours a week out of the cell of the 168 hours per week,” an anonymous inmate of Glenn Dyer wrote in a Oct. 16 letter mailed to the East Bay Times, by a family member. “This has caused severe depression not only to us but to our families.”

Julia Arroyo said her 38-year-old brother-in-law, who has been at the jail since June, joined the hunger strike to draw attention to the conditions inside.

“He told me he has been in solitary confinement,” the San Francisco resident said. “I really worry about his mental health because I really notice the change in him since he's been in there.”

Kelly said inmates are placed in single cell confinement — known as administrative segregation — for security reasons, such as separating rival gangs. Kelly said that doesn't meet the legal definition of solitary confinement where “you deprive a person of all stimulus be it human contact or noise.”

Kelly said the cells have windows, inmates can talk to each other, and pass notes and food.

But inmates and activists said that is merely solitary confinement by another name.

“A lot of times whether they get out at all is at the discretion of the deputy on the shift,” said Sheri Costa, director of Al Costa Community Development center, an East Bay organization serving families with incarcerated loved ones.

Marlene Sanchez, associate director of Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice, said she recently got a call from an inmate at Glenn Dyer who hadn't had a change of clothes or shower in two weeks. Another said he had eaten burnt baked beans three days in row.

“We know this is a long fight,” Sanchez said. It's not going to be a quick solution.”