

Group alleges sexual abuse by guards in AL prison



MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — A prisoner's rights group is asking the U.S. Department of Justice to look into allegations that guards at an Alabama women's prison are sexually abusing the inmates incarcerated there.

The Equal Justice Initiative filed the complaint on Thursday, claiming that guards at the Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka have raped inmates, sexually assaulted them, exchanged smuggled contraband for sexual favors and sexually harassed female prisoners.

"This is a matter of grave concern to me. Sexual misconduct of any kind, including custodial sexual misconduct, is not tolerated by this Department," Corrections Department Commissioner Kim Thomas wrote in a statement.

The U.S. Justice Department did not respond to requests for comment.

Equal Justice Initiative Executive Director Bryan Stevenson said the group didn't have the numbers of how many instances of sexual abuse have occurred at the prison, but based on interviews with 50 victims and witnesses he said it was "pervasive."

"Some of the problems are criminal in nature, some are structural and some deal with policy," Stevenson said. He said more than 20 Tutwiler employees had been fired or transferred in the last five years for having illegal sexual encounters with prisoners. He said female inmates have been raped and impregnated by guards, and with all but one exception received fewer than five days jail time for it.

Stevenson said his group started its investigation of Tutwiler last summer when it was appointed by a federal judge to represent a woman who claimed to have been sexually assaulted. He said in the course of investigating her claim the Equal Justice Initiative heard from other women who said they had been assaulted by corrections officers.

The group settled its client's assault complaint, but Stevenson said they asked the Justice Department to investigate further because they didn't see the Alabama Corrections Department making the changes they wanted after being presented with the findings of the investigation.

"There doesn't seem to be the kind of reaction to this crime that is warranted," he said.

In a news release, the Corrections Department said it maintains a zero-tolerance policy for inmate sexual offenses and custodial sexual misconduct. It said it has practices and procedures in place to identify, monitor and track alleged sexual assaults. The department says there are a number of ways for inmates and other to report abuse, including a hotline and writing or talking to members of prison staff.

The Equal Justice Initiative claims that prison staff and administration punish women who report sexual misconduct by routinely placing them in segregation. While in segregation they are unable to send or receive phone calls, mail or personal visits. They don't have access to recreation, special programs or work.

Stevenson says this creates an atmosphere of intimidation that discourages women from reporting sexual abuse. He said things like that need to change.

"Male guards go into showers, they aren't restricted from going into bathrooms, even though there are plenty of female guards ... subtle things like that we've raised as issues that we'd like to see addressed, as well as not punishing women when they bring up these allegations," he said.