

'You go slowly crazy': Inmate suing Alberta jails over segregation policy speaks out

For two years, Harley Lay spent 23 hours each day alone in the Edmonton Remand Centre, hope gradually ebbing away that he'd ever be moved to a general unit.

Alberta Justice rules say segregation cases are to be reviewed twice a week.

Speaking to Postmedia from the Edmonton Institution maximum security prison Thursday night, where he is currently serving a sentence, Lay said that was never the case for him. At one point, he said, he went five months without a review.

Lay's name is front and centre in a class-action lawsuit against Alberta correctional services over the way administrative segregation is handled "secretly and idiosyncratically" in provincial jails.

Damage to inmates' mental and physical health are the crux of the suit filed this week by lawyer Tony Merchant.

Those allegations have not been proven in court. The justice department won't comment on the case directly.

Ultimately, Lay wants Alberta to change its rules.

"I want to see some sort of legislation so they can't keep doing this to people," he said.

Lay said he was given little explanation as to why he was locked in segregation at the remand centre as he awaited sentencing.

He said he was not in a gang and, despite being in and out of jail for most of his life, said he has only been in one fight inside.

It could have been because of the charges against him - he later received close to seven years for extortion with a firearm, assaulting a peace officer and escaping custody from a Peace River hospital - but he was never told that.

'You go slowly crazy'

Lay summed up his time in segregation as "horrible."

For two years, he couldn't go outside, his only fresh air coming from a breeze straying through a barred window in his cell. Each day, he had two half-hour blocks in which he could eat, shower and use the phone.

There was no programming, no distractions.

"You exercise as much as you possibly can and come out for your half-hour, and the rest of time you slowly go crazy," he said.

Lay is well aware the general public has limited sympathy for a convicted criminal.

"People can say I deserve what I get, but shouldn't I also deserve an opportunity to be offered programming so I can try and change my life? So I don't do that again? Or put in a normal unit where I can work toward getting schooling?" he said.

"All segregation does, for people in there for a long time, is it makes them paranoid, it makes them very angry, and then they lose their minds. It becomes a mental health issue at a certain point."

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