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### ***Return to Sender: Silenced***

In the Nation's largest prison for women, Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), women's voices are silenced. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, CCWF has drastically obstructed our avenues of due process, impeding our remedies illegally. They changed our Inmate Request for Interview Form (GA-22), from carbon to non-carbon copies that mysteriously disappear in the mail. Without having proof it was sent, questions and concerns remain unaddressed. In addition, the grievances with merit are being destroyed. Arbitrarily, they alleged "contamination of unknown or hazardous fluids."

Not all of the women here think in legal terms. However, I showed the camera my clean grievance and deposited it in the appeals box with a handwritten disclaimer: "deposited clean, uncontaminated in unit - # - grievance box, dated and timestamped." I log the date and time for my records. No matter the merit my grievance may contain, usually with the situation, time, date, and camera location, the appeals coordinator either denies it altogether, or it is redirected into the abyss. All staff misconduct allegations, true or not, go without further investigation with no response or status update.

Attempting to air their grievances, 22 female victims of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) were either denied or

unaddressed by Warden Pallares. This misconduct was reported in 2023.

CCWF's practice of making paperwork disappear is barely a glimpse into their suppression of women's voices. The system was built by men, for men, ignoring the experiences of women. The majority of women who serve life sentences are incarcerated as a result of murdering their abuser, and adjacent circumstances that also violate the law are disregarded during sentencing (Dey, 2022 and Davis, 2022).

Women do *not* band together to fight for their rights. They stay silent as they have learned throughout their lives. Many women here refuse to file grievances. Staff retaliation keeps the pen away from paper. Further suppression outweighs the potential for success. In class at CCWF, I raise my hand to ask questions for clarification and understanding. Teachers and facilitators alike snuff out my voice.

With the passing of SB 132 went the passing of women's rights, safety, and security in prison. SB132 was intended to allow "people incarcerated [to] go to the prison in alignment with their gender identity." However, the first transfer bus contained a serial rapist, along with plenty of men who identify as straight males. We are not talking about a few slipping through the cracks of the system they manipulated. We are

talking about busses of copious men, abusing, fighting, harassing, raping, and/or 'consensually impregnating' women. Women CANNOT DENY a MAN (SB 132 transfer) from housing in their 8-person cell with 4 bunk beds. We as women can deny other women from housing in our cells, but not those with their junk still intact, or else be sent to -AD-SEG. The rules that apply to them, no longer apply to us women.

WOMEN ARE PUNISHED WHEN THEY SPEAK UP. SILENCED.

WOMEN ENDURE RETALIATION FOR. PUTTING PEN TO PAPER. SUPPRESSED. WOMEN'S VOICES FALL ON DEAF EARS. FORGOTTEN.

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### ***Incarcerated Students or Prisoner's College?***

I have been involved in college programs in prison since 2005. I've taken classes from several colleges, earned three associate degrees and membership in the international Phi Theta Kappa honors society, and just graduated from California State University with a bachelor's degree. There are a lot of barriers to college for the incarcerated-from paying for classes to finding proctors to getting class materials to even just getting support from the prison - but one of the biggest barriers relates to students wanting to *stay* in college. It is nearly impossible to find a prison

education program that treats us like students who happen to be incarcerated rather than prisoners who happen to be taking college classes. To an on-campus student, some of these issues might be trivial, but for us, they are part of a larger trend that speaks to the carceral system and our treatment as inventory, not people.

Communication is a big part of it. For example, when I became a CSU student in 2021, I didn't even know that I was enrolled or that the program existed. One day at work, the building officer told me that I had to move to another building "for college." It wasn't until the first day of class (which date was a mystery until a few days prior) that we even learned what classes we would be taking. It feels like we are expected to be grateful for the opportunity, and should be willing to drop everything and just go along with what we're being told not asked to do. As prisoners, what else could we possibly have going on?

Having a full-time job and going to school is of course a challenge for anyone, but it seems to work against me, often when it comes to learning about the programs I'm involved in. I regularly miss all or most of orientation and other meetings because we're not told about them in advance, only when they're about to start (and even though all the staff know where I work - an editor for the Mule Creek Post-it still usually takes a good half hour before it's noticed that I'm not there and someone then calls for me). One day I found out that the entire class had had their pictures taken for flyers and the program's Facebook page, another surprise event that no one knew about but for which we were expected to drop everything and go when called (for those who were called at all...).

This lack of communication means I may not even finish the classes for my BA degree. Though I've already had the graduation ceremony, like most of my classmates I was still going to need to take two electives in the fall to complete all the requirements. After the spring semester, though, I learned that the university was not counting one of my community college classes for a graduation requirement, meaning I'd need three electives to graduate, but we're only being offered two classes this fall. I could have taken a community college class during the spring that would have fulfilled the requirement, had I known; I couldn't take it in the fall because I'd been assigned to a mandatory "life skills" class by the prison at the same time. This same class overlaps with one of those two electives in the fall, so I'll still end the year two electives short of graduation, and it's unclear if Pell Grants will continue funding my classes much longer.

"Figure it out" was the refrain of our first two semesters. Over and over we heard this from the prison's coordinator, any time we had a concern about something. No guidance or assistance, just a retort to "Figure it out." Once, a computer technician came from headquarters to lecture us about an annoying new program rolled out for no discernible reason (another meeting I missed most of because it was a surprise and I was at work). Every concern we raised about the unnecessary and difficult new program was met with a bold "Figure it out." At one point, he even compared the challenges his high-school-aged son has to what we're going through; he figured it out, and so can we. Four semesters in, due to the computer system we continue to be unable to learn what scores we get on final exams or

presentations or really anything that would be graded in the last week of class; all we get is a courtesy notice from the program coordinator letting us know we earned an 'A' or 'B' or whatever.

Computers, ironically, lead to their own set of problems. Because we have laptops and almost everything we need is posted on the prison system's version of the online learning platform Canvas, we get very few printed materials for class. But as there is only 100 MB of storage in the network for each student, we have to purge everything-research, essays, notes, lectures- periodically to make room for new materials. This leaves us with no access to anything from previous semesters like we're starting our college education from scratch with every class.

Dinner is also a problem. The first couple of days of class, trays were delivered to the education area for us, but after that, they were sent to the building to wait for us when we returned from school. This worked out perfectly for everybody, but this past semester a new staff member decided that he didn't like this setup and ordered the kitchen to stop sending trays. He's managed to manufacture a story for his bosses about how we have a 45-minute break between classes so that we can go to dinner (I don't know where it is: 3 to 4:15, 4:30 to 5:45, and 6 to 8:45 were our scheduled classes) and how we can go eat even if the chow hall is closed, but of course nobody talks to us about this. The administration thinks everything is fine because the only people they are talking to about it are not incarcerated. Imagine a student on campus having to rush back to their dorm room to drop off their materials and pick up eating utensils, then off to the cafeteria,

then back to drop things off and pick things up again to go to class, all in 15 minutes. That would be insane, right?

Folsom Lake College doesn't seem to be much better. It is supposed to be the prison's college partner, but is actually the least accessible of the colleges I've dealt with while here. I have no idea how to get in contact with anyone, or whom to contact, about an education plan or questions about classes, because there is no address or other information given to us when we enroll nor transcripts sent after classes. A year and a half later, the art instructor still hasn't responded to the emails sent on my behalf by a kind teacher here asking about my final grade or to have my last assignments returned. It was only after weekly badgering that a professor in my second semester told me my student ID number; most students here have never received theirs. The College's interns have no idea where they stand on meeting the requirements for an associate degree, and their curriculum and assignments change so frequently and arbitrarily that I can understand why students quit the program. I am frustrated on their behalf when I hear about the constantly changing class, the ungraded or clearly unread but graded anyway assignments, and the internship hours that are questioned or even voided for lack of "evidence." It pains me to say that I have changed my mind about ever participating in this program, and whenever anyone asks me about it I give them all the warnings I can.

I have been in prison for 22 years now, serving time on high-security level IV mainline facilities down to this low-security Level II "soft" facility where I live now. My college experience here has made me feel less human than

anywhere before. The CSU director has threatened disciplinary action ("to the fullest extent of the law") for working on assignments for one class while we're in another. For a semester we were being searched on our way out of class (while no other classes or programs were), a minor indignity but one which I can't remember happening in the past 15 years. The speakers for our CSU graduation, a major event in our lives, were privately selected by a vice principal new to the program and seemed to reward not the best students but her favorite ones; our challenge to the process was met with anger and the promise of another secretive selection. (spoiler alert: it turned out the same).

We are treated like prisoners -told what we're going to do and when, without question or complaint- not like students who collaborate in their own educational process. I and most of my fellow students couldn't wait for this bachelor's degree. Not because of the accomplishment, but because it means the end of the educational journey, and we don't have to be treated this way anymore. We can just go back to being prisoners.

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### ***Assembly Constitutional Amendment 4***

*On July 5, 2023, the following was recorded as a two-minute statement to be presented to the California Legislature regarding ACA 4 which bars the prisoners right to vote.*

My name is James Kor and I'm incarcerated at California Substance Abuse Treatment Facility in Corcoran. I support Assembly Constitutional Amendment 4 which will give prisoners the right to vote. A good way to get incarcerated citizens to think differently from how they did in their criminal pasts is to get them engaged in thinking about

positive, interesting things that are new to them. Getting them engaged in the actual democratic process, through voting, will not only do that; it will also be the act of placing responsibility on them to become informed about issues and candidates so that their votes matter.

Statistics and common sense should lead to the conclusion that very few prisoners were voting during their past lifestyles, so the taking of that previously unexercised "right" of theirs is no logical punishment in the first place. Furthermore, what legitimate, meaningful purpose has been or will continue to be served by maintaining such an outdated policy? Moreover, the centuries-long disenfranchisement of disproportionate numbers of people of color from the election process also factors into this issue. ACA 4 can be the State of California stepping forward with some remedy for this.

Finally, by looking back through history we can gain an edge toward looking into the future. That said, I'd like these few words of mine to matter and be shared, so let us look back to the elections of 2000. Without even a majority, but a microscopically thin margin of votes, George Bush went to the White House. Had prisoners the right to vote, nationwide, it is most likely that Al Gore would have become President. Then there would not have been:

- a) falsified reports of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) possessed by Saddam Hussein;
- b) nor the Iraq War costing approximately 5000 U.S. soldiers their lives and causing tens of thousands more to be injured;
- c) nor the triggering of civil war in Iraq or the political vacuum

it created for the emergence of the terrorist group ISIS;  
 d) nor trillions of dollars foolishly squandered from our Treasury;  
 e) John Roberts and Samuel Alito would not be on our Supreme Court and Roe v. Wade would still be intact;  
 f) and it seems very unlikely that any pathway into the White House would have been created for Donald Trump.

For these things alone, prisoners having the right to vote would have been a very good thing. Now, California can look forward, envision more good through ACA 4, and set an example for other states to follow in the process. Thank you for giving my voice the chance to matter.

Notes for the reader: Yes, it was both a biased Supreme Court and an outmoded Electoral College that made the votes of the majority of Americans not matter in the 2000 election. Racist factions in our government have been exploiting both to steal elections. Also overtly on display has been the campaign to dilute the power of votes from people of color. Yes, these racist factions were all for the idea of "manifest destiny" when it meant that "destiny" legitimized the

stealing of land from Native Americans and Mexico (the U.S. was deemed destined to have those lands? WTF?). But those same factions are not so keen on the reality that America is destined to have a population consisting of a majority of citizens who are not white and/or identify as being multi-racial. All of a sudden, that "manifest destiny" (that which is obviously inevitable) is no longer a good thing to the white powers that be. These are the ones who've had no qualms about starting wars, stealing territories, lying, cheating, or even staging or supporting wrongful insurrection, (i.e. Jan. 6, 2021). Their agenda is and has been to maintain and increase political power- by any means necessary- regardless of what the majority of American citizens want. I ask the question: What does a society ignoring and, thus, tolerating such, deserve? What say we let the daily headlines sledgehammer that point home?

Personally, I believe that much more bold and decisive steps should be taken to remove the fangs from the trash in our government I've been referring to; the right and actual "duty" for such is enshrined in our Declaration of Independence. But ACA 4 is at least a start and it will be more

than baby steps toward "a more perfect union." So—please do support it.  
 Happy Bastille Day!

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*The Vanguard Incarcerated Press* a newsletter for and by the incarcerated seeks to shed light in some of the darkest corners of America's mass incarceration system with fair, accurate, and impactful reporting.

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