

North Carolina's multi-layered shame

Posted By [Chris Fitzsimon](#) On 4/6/2009 @ 9:34 pm In [Fitzsimon File](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

Senate leaders began to unveil their secretly-written budget proposal in pieces Monday, a day after a News & Observer report revealed in graphic terms how the state government now facing furloughs and deep budget cuts is already failing to meet its legal responsibilities and moral obligations.

The N&O's Michael Biesecker told the story of Timothy Helms, a mentally ill inmate in the state prison system. It is really the story of the intersection of two desperately troubled parts of state government, the systems of criminal justice and mental health. It includes personal cruelty, institutional doublespeak, and the failure of state officials to honestly address the depth of the scandal of mental health care.

Helms is now a quadriplegic after what almost certainly was a severe beating by prison guards in his solitary confinement cell in a prison in Alexander County. He was behind bars for his role in a drunken driving accident 15 years ago that killed two teenage boys in another car and the man with Helms in a pickup truck owned by Helms' mother.

Helms' problems started long before the accident. His was diagnosed with several mental illnesses that his brother traces to injuries he suffered in an accident when he was 12. Helms was in and out of mental institutions and the criminal justice system after the accident for offenses including drunk driving.

The beating from the guards came last August after Helms started a fire in the solitary confinement cell where he had spent the previous 571 days, sometimes beating his head against the wall and cutting himself with a razor.

Department of Correction officials aren't saying much about Helms' case, telling his brother that there no was no evidence that he was beaten, though that is what an emergency room doctor concluded.

The State Bureau of Investigation was notified of Helms' beating in September and finally got around to the investigation in March, after the N&O asked about the case. Officials won't let Helms' brother visit him because Helms cannot sign the form to allow it, not a surprise since he can't even sit up in bed.

You have to wonder why prison officials were surprised that an obviously mentally ill man snapped after spending 571 days in solitary confinement and why it appears their response was to beat him nearly to death.

The case has prompted attorneys with Disability Rights North Carolina to intervene on Helms' behalf and call for changes in the way the Department of Correction handles inmates with mental illness or a developmental disability.

Those calls have come before, usually after studies finding that people with mental illness are languishing in prisons and jails. Nationally, more than 800,000 people with a severe mental illness are incarcerated every year.

A 2007 study identified a wide range of problems in the way offenders with a mental illness in North Carolina were treated by law enforcement authorities and the staff of local jails. Not to mention the struggle people with addiction or other mental illnesses face finding services before they commit a crime.

As shocking as Biesecker's investigative report about Timothy Helms may be, much of it is not surprising. The state has been failing people with mental illness and addiction for a long time, on the streets, in mental institutions, and in prisons and jails.

The report comes as debate rages in the General Assembly about which alternative sentencing program to cut, which substance abuse services to end, which lives to ignore.

Maybe everybody did everything right before Timothy Helms drank too much and got in that pickup truck in 1994, but it's not likely. And it's pretty clear than a lot of people did plenty of things wrong since Helms was locked up.

It seems the best state officials can do now is deny any wrongdoing or refuse to discuss it. Thank goodness the N&O's and Disability Rights are talking about it.

Let's hope state lawmakers are listening and realize the budget debate isn't just about saving money and ending programs. It is about people's lives and addressing our state's shame.

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