

REPORTING BEHIND WALLS DURING COVID

TABITHA LEE MAYNARD[∞]

Tabitha Maynard reports on the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic for people in prison, which includes overcrowding and a lack of sanitation supplies. She then discusses the flawed Michigan parole process that seems to set those released up for failure.

During a time where "social distancing" is a matter of life or death, the overcrowding of our prison systems takes on a whole new light. Here at WHV, 'Women's Huron Valley' Correctional Facility, we are hit with a trifecta of overcrowding issues: Being in the only women's prison in the state of Michigan—there is nowhere else to house us. Being in the state of Michigan itself, that is, one of the top states in the race to lock up as many of its citizens as possible for as long as possible. Lastly, we are in a nation that locks up more of its own citizens than any other.

The prison system has the audacity to report we are at the lowest numbers in three decades, glossing over the fact that many prisons are housing more than triple or quadruple the population they were designed and built to house. Here at WHV we have about 1,000 women still double bunked in cells designed and built to house only one prisoner. They did pull most of the women out of the multi-bunk rooms set up in old closets, offices, and dayrooms that they had them (illegally?) stashed away in. Still 'social distancing' is all but impossible.

[∞] Tabitha Lee Maynard is 43 years old and has been in a Michigan prison since 2001 for the murder of her father. Her earliest release date is 2025. Ms. Maynard grew up in a tumultuous family atmosphere, where domestic violence and sexual abuse was considered "normal" and ignored. As a child, events such as escaping from her father in the middle of the night while he chased her mother with a 44, moving to many different states with family members she barely knew, and being held hostage by her father to control her mother, was her "normal." Ms. Maynard was a ward of the court from the age of 8, though she stayed in custody of her father even after he was arrested for sexual abuse. By age 12, she was engaging in risky and life-threatening behaviors as 'suicide attempts,' including Russian roulette with the same 44 that her father used to threaten her mother. She has always worked at least two jobs since the age of 15, including farm labor, security, and retail. She joined the Marines at 17 and shipped out two days after graduating high school. However, she was injured soon after and cut loose, sent adrift with no other goals. She was sentenced to 25 years on September 11, 2001.

The labels Christian, middle class, blue collar, Republican, Tea party, law enforcement & military, white, NRA member, and hunter can all be applied to her family. Before her conviction, she was a 'law abiding citizen,' had never even received a parking ticket, and never drank, smoked, or did drugs. She wonders now how others would label her: murderer, felon, criminal? After 21 years free, only 3 of which as an 'adult' and 25 years locked up in prison with an excellent prison record, Ms. Maynard will be released. She wonders, what then?

On top of this the facility and staff are VERY restrictive in our use of cleaning materials—disinfectants, paper towels, rags, gloves, watered down bleach, etc. Then some c/o's talk about how dirty we are and act like we are all contagious, while at the same time denying us the items to clean with. We currently have NO physical contact with the outside world except them, so who's the real contagion bringing in the virus??? Our requests to have a hand sanitizer dispenser installed at the guards' stations for us to use was flatly denied. Our request to then have a non-alcoholic hand sanitizer made available for us to purchase on our store has not happened. We have to share a phone, Jpay kiosk, store kiosk, and other items with one to two hundred women. They have signs up at some of these stations for them to be cleaned before and after each use, but yet again that ability is not given to us. Someone that tests positive is removed from that unit for 7 to 14 days then put right back without being tested again, after which they again test positive along with their bunk mate and a few others the following week. We have to crowd into a line with many other units to get our meals and medications.

Then we have the Parole Board representatives telling the public they are doing everything they can to safely lower the prison population, which is very confusing from my view. I have been in prison for 20 years with 4 left to serve on a 2nd degree murder charge. In all that time the view from behind the wall is that the parole board mainly releases those they seem to know or should know from their prison records are going to COME RIGHT BACK IN. Sometimes they don't even last a month!!! Or if they don't come right back in, it is only because they died from an overdose. Rumor is they are now sending some of them home with some 'narcans'. Have to keep them alive long enough to bring them back in? We watch it happen every day in here. Drugs are all over the place. It's like they only hand out paroles to those that stay high in here. Been rushed to the hospital for an overdose? Been locked up in segregation (the hole)? Here's your prize, a parole.

Now I hope it is not true, parole board members have a very difficult job, and I certainly don't have access to all the information they do. All I know is the perspective we behind the wall get. And that is that only those sure to return are given a chance at freedom. Like it is a way for the powers that be can say "See, see they (prisoners) never change or can't make it." I've seen some of the same people come in and out of prison a dozen different times, while so many others never get a single chance. Even now in the middle of a pandemic they are doing the same, denying many parole because they have not finished their programming. Programming that IS NOT RUNNING right now and could be done much safer on the outside on parole.

I'm not one to believe in conspiracy theories but when you take the fact that the prison system is BIG BUSINESS with many careers and fortunes relying on it not just surviving but growing and the seeming practice of releasing only those that will come right back???????? There is a common practice of keeping the public in the dark or/and out and out giving false information. They can say whatever they want because who can say differently, "a prisoner"? Where video and audio evidence

suddenly disappears when a judge orders it turned over...Where our incoming and outgoing mail are regularly rejected/censored...After so many horrible acts like forced sterilization of minorities, rapes, murders, and so many other abuses have been exposed and proven in so many prisons...We are just prisoners after all— the rejects of society. Why should we be believed or bothered with.

Then of course there is our Governor and Congress who are not making any changes. They have the most power to make the most positive changes, yet they do nothing. Michigan is at the top of the list for the sickest prisoners and prison staff. The prison staff is being worked into the ground with no regard to their safety or health. Some have been stuck working for over 24 hours to barely have time to go home, sleep, and eat before coming right back to do it all over again. Even if you don't care about the prisoners themselves, care about the staff that work here and the community we are all in. I am willing to share as an example anything about my own case and prison record that anyone wants to know. I believe the only way to bring light to the darkness is being completely open.