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Department of Corrections partners with Disability Rights Washington to Remove Self-Harm Violations

OLYMPIA – Beginning July 4, 2014, the Washington State Department of Corrections will no longer discipline incarcerated offenders for acts of self-harm, including attempted suicide and self-mutilation. The decision comes as the agency continues to examine the importance of ensuring the safety and security of staff while being responsive to offenders' mental health needs.

“For too long, there has been a short-sighted tradition of punishing or isolating those who are unable to control their impulses,” explained Scott Frakes, Deputy Director for Prisons. “In too many cases this can lead to untreated people, whose conditions are worsened by a longer prison stay, releasing directly from a segregation unit back into the community.”

Together with Disability Rights Washington (DRW), the Department over the past year has examined issues surrounding segregation practices in Washington state prisons, particularly. Research shows tools such as treatment, programs and behavior management plans are more effective ways to reduce occurrences of offender self-harm than punitive or disciplinary actions.

“Based on our work with inmates, we approached the Department of Corrections about changing discipline practices related to self-harm,” said DRW Executive Director Mark Stroh. “The Department was immediately responsive to our concerns. DRW has worked successfully with the Department over the last few years, and will continue to monitor this and other issues through our prison project, [Amplifying Voices of Inmates with Disabilities](#).”

“This decision is consistent with current research on what works to prevent offenders from harming themselves,” added Frakes. “We have positive change agent tools such as treatment, programs and behavior-management plans that effectively decrease the occurrences and risks of self-harm in prisons.”

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Inmates in Washington state prisons sometimes are disciplined for failing to adhere to rules designed to maintain a safe facility, including possessing certain contraband, fighting with other offenders, staff assaults and attempting self-harm. The self-harm infractions historically have resulted in the loss of good-conduct time for offenders. In cases where offenders were infracted and lost good-conduct time only for acts of self-harm and did not engage in other disruptive behavior, good-conduct time will be restored consistent with timeframe limitations described in [DOC policy](#).

The Department of Corrections will continue to strive to mitigate any risk of harm to staff and offenders. Safety and security continue to be paramount concerns in corrections. The agency will continue to identify new tools and explore new interventions that help offenders reduce their risk of committing misconduct and new crimes, both inside facilities and in the community.