

Advertisement

12 PREMIUM CIGARS For Only **\$29⁹⁵** compare at \$83

This perfect gift includes **FREE SHIPPING!** see site for details

THOMPSON CIGAR America's Oldest Mail Order Cigar Company **ORDER NOW**



 **PRINT THIS**

Powered by 

 Click to Print

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Jury awards women \$15.4 million for sexual abuse in prison

Advertisement

By Tina Lam, Detroit Free Press

Ten current and former prisoners at the state's Scott Women's Correctional Facility held hands and sobbed as a Washtenaw County jury awarded them \$15.4 million in damages today for rapes, invasions of privacy and sexual harassment at the hands of corrections officers.

The 10 jurors took the unusual step of reading a formal apology to the tearful women on behalf of the citizens of Michigan for what they had suffered.

"We would like to express our extreme regret and apologies," one juror read to the women standing, heads mostly bowed, before them. Washtenaw Circuit Court Judge Timothy Connors gave the plaintiffs a chance to speak to the jury.

"I'm heading back to prison today," one of the women said, facing the jury. "I feel strong today because of you. I thank you for believing in us."

The verdicts ranged from \$335,000 to \$3.6 million. The jurors found there was a sexually hostile atmosphere at the prison and the state did not act to protect the prisoners. Today's verdict came after a three-week trial.

The state expects to appeal the case, said Russ Marlan, spokesman for the Department of Corrections.

Seven of the women are still prisoners at Scott and three have been released.

"I was shocked," said one of the plaintiffs, whose name the Free Press is not disclosing because of the nature of the acts. She has been released from prison and lives in Saginaw with her children. "We've had so many doors closed along the way."

The prisoners testified in court about sexual advances, rapes, and officers they said groped them several times a day. One was 16 when she testified to being raped by an officer in his 50s, another teen testified she was raped repeatedly by the same officer and another was forced to perform oral sex and raped at different times by three different officers. The women said the officers made sexual comments and would at times pull aside shower curtains to watch them showering.

"We showed there was a pervasive, sexually abusive atmosphere at Scott Regional Correctional Facility," said plaintiff's attorney Deborah LaBelle. The women are part of a group of 400 current and former prisoners in the class action lawsuit which covers the state's three women's prisons. Another trial involving female inmates who claim sexual abuse is scheduled later this month in the same courtroom. The large number of potential victims raises the stakes for the state.

Beginning about seven years ago, the state started removing male officers from the housing of female inmates.

The case was first filed in 1996 but only came to trial this year after years of appeals and stays over issues such as whether prisoners are covered under the state's civil rights law. A federal judge ruled last year that they are covered.

LaBelle said the plaintiffs have tried for 12 years to get the state to recognize there's a problem.

"The state says it's consensual, or that it doesn't believe what the women say," she said.

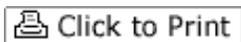
Earlier this week, a Huron Valley Women's Correctional Center correctional officer was sentenced to three years in prison by a Washtenaw Circuit Court jury for raping a female prisoner. "It goes on and on," LaBelle said. More trials are scheduled this year.

The state has argued that many of the assaults were not reported, and that when they were reported, it disciplined the officers involved, including one arrest of an officer at the prison.

Contributing: Staff writer Dawson Bell contributed to this report.

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2008-02-02-prison-abuse_N.htm?imw=Y



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2008 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.