

## **A SYSTEM AT ODDS WITH ITSELF**

Divide each problem into as many parts as possible;  
that each part being more easily conceived, the whole  
may be more intelligible.

**Descartes, “Discourse on Method”**

A system or organization should be judged by its most problematic elements. If these elements are ignored, they will impact the healthy elements, thereby dooming change to failure.

**James Chapman**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The ultimate significance of the closure of Tamms As of December 5, 2012, it now appears that the Governor’s decision to close Tamms will be permanent-that this abomination will be closed. Congratulations to Laurie Jo Reynolds and the Tamms Year 10 Committee for a magnificent achievement. Their collective, sustained and heroic efforts show what can be accomplished when people with a shared vision come together.

But, despite this great victory, let’s not deceive ourselves: the prisons run by the Illinois Department of Corrections, the Cook County Jail, the post-release care and virtually all aspects of the corrections system in Illinois are in a shambles, a situation that will not be eased or changed by the closure of Tamms and other facilities.

Moreover, this situation is not a secret. For the last 20 or more years, special commissions, committees, studies, have demonstrated the increasingly dysfunctional nature of our so-called corrections system. But no positive change occurs: the system only worsens. As a result, today we have an excessively bloated prison system, understaffed-in most instances, facilities that are only warehouses, and poor ones at that. And we can now easily see that the groups and elected officials that opposed the Tamms closing represent the reasons why the system continues to deteriorate.

Stated differently, the State can no longer afford the Prison Industrial Complex, that “wonderful genie” that was pulled out of a bottle in the 1980's and has

exploded beyond anyone's expectations. Now not enough people have the will to put the genie back into the bottle.

Let's take one incident that occurred over three years ago, an incident that at least in substantial part dramatizes the bankruptcy of the Illinois Corrections System.

### **A HOMICIDE AT STATEVILLE**

On April 2, 2009, Richard Conner and James Leezer had been cell mates ("cellies") in F-House at Stateville Correctional Center, located near Joliet, Illinois, about 40 miles southwest of Chicago. On that date, Leezer was found dead, lying on his bunk in the cell he shared with Conner. He has been strangled, apparently by Connor.

The April 2, 2011 murder of Leezer by Conner is an event that ordinarily would have concerned prison officials ("let's try to stop this from happening again"), Leezer's family, a few prison activists, newspapers that serve Joliet, including suburban editions of Chicago publications like the Chicago Tribune.. And then this gruesome incident would be tucked away and forgotten. Stated differently, the death of a prisoner at the hand of another prisoner or a correctional officer or by his own hand is, unfortunately, almost an everyday occurrence in prisons throughout the planet.

If so, then why should Leezer's death be viewed differently from other similar deaths? This is why:

Leezer's homicide by Conner, like an enormous snapshot, represents a conjunction of the typical problems, errors, mismanagement and ill-conceived policies that reflect the dysfunctional manner in which IDOC prisons operate.

As Descartes implies in this essay's introduction, one cannot deal with one problem in a system simply by focusing on one aspect of that problem or system. In other words, a prison system is like a living organism, a human being if you will. A doctor (hopefully) would not treat a patient's fractured forearm, ignore a malignant node in the arm pit of the same arm, and then conclude that the patient was healthy because the forearm fracture has been set.

In other words, fixing one problem may create other problems. For example: where are Tamms prisoners being placed? Most probably, most will go to the extremely dilapidated maximum security prisons like Menard, Pontiac and Stateville which ironically are on lockdown much of the time—a serious form of isolation (although not as extreme as Tamms). It is reported that some Tamms prisoners would prefer to remain at Tamms than be transferred to any of these facilities.

And that's where the Leezer homicide is, tragically, so helpful. If we analyze all the parts that played into this event, we shall, as Kant suggests, better grasp the true condition of Illinois corrections and, hopefully, develop a coherent plan to change this system.

### **Who Was James Leezer?**

James Leezer, on April 2, 2009, was 37 years of age. He was from Joliet, Illinois. He was the only child of adoptive parents. He had been a troubled youth, growing up in Bolingbrook and Lisle, Illinois, ironically each only a few minutes drive from Stateville Prison. His family reported that Leezer had first been locked up as a young teen for starting a fire. He became a drug abuser and had been treated in psychiatric hospitals.

But there is more to Mr. Leezer than these dry facts. As he grew older, he commenced doing life “on the installment plan,” as veteran prisoners observed. Leezer's first felony conviction occurred in 1992 at age 20. In the next 15 years, he was convicted of three more felonies, all associated with the theft of a motor vehicle or possession of a stolen vehicle.

Leezer was also known as a White racist. He was a member of a White supremacist group both in and out of prison. While in F-House in April 2009, he was heard to yell racial slurs at Black officers on duty in F-House. (Stateville has the most racially integrated staff in the State prison system.)

On the day he died, Leezer was serving a five year sentence for possession of a stolen vehicle. With time reduced for good behavior (day for day), Leezer was due to be released 17 days hence, April 18. He apparently been sent to Stateville to serve time in segregation for an internal rules violation.

Why a non-violent offender like Leezer would be sent to Stateville, a heavy duty facility, for this reason is not known. Leezer most likely had been doing his time at a medium security prison, which would have had its own segregation unit.

According to one newspaper article, the IDOC administration had listed Leezer as “vulnerable,” meaning he should have been kept apart from dangerous inmates. He also exhibited other questionable behavior while Conner was his cellie: for example, according to one source, Leezer rubbed feces on his cell walls and taunted those around him with the fact he would soon be released.<sup>1</sup>

### **Who is Richard Conner?**

Richard Conner was born April 16, 1971. He is a Black man. In March, 1991, at the age of 20, Conner was charged with the crime of murder and robbery while engaged in the hold-up of a convenience store. He was convicted of these crimes and received a life sentence with no hope of parole. The IDOC inmate website lists this conviction as Conner’s only felony.

Shortly before his transfer to Stateville and the events in question, Conner had been incarcerated at the Tamms SuperMax prison located at the southern tip of Illinois. The prison was intended to hold “the worst of the worst” of the IDOC’s prison population. Prisoners at Tamms are kept in their cells virtually 24/7 with no contact permitted with other prisoners. Apparently, Conner had been sent to Tamms because of an “attack” on a correctional officer, although the nature of the attack is not known at this time. Nor is there evidence that he was gang affiliated or had engaged in a pattern of inappropriate activity.

Conner’s physical and emotional condition were problematic. He was known to staff to be “buggy,” as the term is used in prison—that is, emotionally unstable. Reports suggest that before his transfer, he was screaming about voices he was hearing, images he “saw,” etc.—in other words, he was delusional.

---

1

Other sources paint a somewhat different picture of Leezer. That is, when staff brought Conner’s special diet to the cell’s chuckhole shelf, Leezer brought it to Conner. And both men had unsuccessfully requested staff to place each of them in different cells.

For a period, he had been transferred from Tamms to the Mental Health Unit at Dixon Correctional Center in western Illinois. It is not public knowledge about the reasons for the transfer, how long he was there, and what treatment he received while at Dixon (or upon his return to Tamms).

Conner, while at Tamms, was also on dialysis, a condition, with the dialysis treatment, that can lead to emotional outbursts.

Shortly before his transfer to Stateville, Conner had attempted suicide; and in the act had further injured his kidneys. Allegedly, hospitals close to Tamms had refused to accept Conner as a patient. Hence, his transfer (most probably temporary), 300 miles away to Stateville where seriously ill patients are treated at the University of Illinois Hospital on Chicago's near west side.

Prisoners on transfer from Tamms to another prison like Stateville are to be "single celled," at least for a period of adjustment. And that incarceration should be in solitary at the infinitely more modern Reception Facility (prison) located immediately to the west of the Stateville compound.

### **The Nature of F-House Where Conner and Leezer Were Incarcerated**

F-House, where Conner and Leezer were incarcerated, is shaped like a roundhouse, a concept devised by English prison reformer Jeremy Bentham in the early 1800's. Bentham called the structure a "Panopticon,"<sup>2</sup> a structure with cells that radiate around a central point—a guard tower—from which an 'all-seeing supervisor' would monitor them." (Morris & Rothman, *The Oxford History of the Prison* (Oxford 1995, p. 274).

Once very popular in the United States, the Stateville F-House panopticon is the only such structure left in this country. And a visit there will quickly tell you why: F-House is an ominous place. By any current correctional standard, it should be abandoned, torn down (just like the three others at Stateville were years ago). In fact, it is typical of the outmoded Stateville facility.

---

<sup>2</sup>Panoptic: presenting a panoramic view. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (11<sup>th</sup> ed. 2003)

Picture the interior of a glass (huge) turned upside down. Inside the glass, there are four galleries (floors of cells) that circle the interior completely-the first on the ground floor, and then three more rising one over the other. On each gallery, there are approximately 60 cells, each about 10 feet wide and 12 feet deep, one immediately next to the other. The cells were intended for one person, but now hold two prisoners, double-bunked. Usually F-House is filled to this doubled “capacity.”

F-House’s very structure makes it dysfunctional. An officer must climb stairs to each gallery, often carrying heavy loads. And then, when on a gallery, must walk half the house’s circumference to reach cells most distant from the stairs. With limited staff, officers often make rounds to check cells (“the count”) no more than once an eight hour shift. The area around the cells is poorly illuminated. Looking out from the railed walkway of each gallery, the cells across the vast open space seem distant and indistinct.

In the middle of that open space rises a tower almost as high as the fourth gallery. At the tower’s peak is a partially enclosed “cockpit” where one to two officers always sit, each heavily armed, one with a high powered rifle and the other, a shotgun. These officers represent the “all-seeing supervisors” Bentham contemplated.

Each cell has bars immediately next to solid glass. Communication from the outside on the gallery with a prisoner on the inside is difficult-one has to almost yell to conduct a meaningful conversation. With the questionable illumination, the bars and the glass, it is difficult to see into the cells, even from the tower.

Most prisoners in F-House are in “segregation” for internal rules violations. They do not leave their cells except for medical treatment, occasional yard, or a visit. Their food is brought to them by the officers or “trustees.”

It is also a very noisy place, often disturbingly so. Prisoners are constantly yelling out: to prisoners in other cells; to prisoners or guests they may observe on the prison grounds outside while they peering through the small window at the cell’s far end; or requesting a correctional officer to come to the cell for many different reasons; or just calling out, even wailing.

## **The Prison Staff Discovers the Death of Leezer**

Correctional officers normally work eight hour shifts: the first shift commencing at 7:00 a.m. and concluding at 3:00 p.m. and so on. When officers start a new shift, they must do a “count”-that is, they must physically account for each prisoner assigned to their unit. It’s a skin check: the officer must see the prisoner and determine that he is OK (read: alive). If the reported count does not square with the assigned number, then all movement in the prison stops until everyone is accounted for.

On April 2, 2009, officers on the first shift started their count shortly after 7:00 a.m. As an officer walked the gallery near where Leezer and Conner were celled, he heard other prisoners complain to him about the terrible odor coming from that cell. When the officer checked the cell where Leezer and Conner were incarcerated, he could see only Conner standing along side the bunks. In the bunk that Leezer occupied, he could only see a blanket covering a shape.

The officer asked Conner about Leezer. Conner did not reply. The officer unlocked the cell and entered. At that point, Conner bent over, lifted up the blanket, and pointing to the bunk, said: “Here’s Leezer.” The officer quickly examined Leezer. He determined he had no pulse, no breath, he was dead.

Leezer’s body was removed to the offices of the Coroner of Will County, where Stateville was located. An autopsy was performed. Cause of death: Leezer was strangled to death. Sometime thereafter, the State’s Attorney of Will County indicted Conner for the murder of Leezer.

## **WHAT ISSUES DOES THE LEEZER HOMICIDE DRAMATIZE?**

Let’s examine the problems that the Leezer homicide raises, problems that are found in most IDOC prisons, especially the medium and maximum institutions:

1. The IDOC is excessively overcrowded. Almost 50,000 prisoners in a system house about 35,000. Two men are required to live together in cells designed for one. It seems a miracle that more fights do not occur.
2. The staff is short-handed. Taken as a whole, too few staff are required to do too much in a very difficult, often intense, dangerous job. They simply cannot monitor the conduct and needs of prisoners on a consistent basis. Often they are simply tired. Leezer's death was not noticed by staff for at least several hours, and then only on the request of other prisoners who noticed the unusual odor coming from the subject cell.
3. Much of the staff is demoralized. Recently, an assistant warden who came from another state's system was appalled by the low morale, the discontent of the Stateville staff. He had not encountered it before. In this case, staff ignored the pleas of both Leezer and Connor that they be separated. This fact is particularly appalling since Leezer was taunting staff with racial epithets.
4. The three maximum security prisons are simply outmoded-they are not capable of being managed properly. Two were built in the early 1920's and part of Menard is much older. They should be torn down.
5. The overcrowding, along with the short-handed, demoralized staff, has lead the administration to use lockdowns as their means to maintain control of the population. These lockdowns are often extended and include the medium prisoners as well. Menard averages half the year on lockdown. This procedure deprives prisoners of access to the few programs that exist in most prisons.
6. Medical care, both physical and emotional, is sorely lacking. The courts are flooded with law suits where prisoners assert they are denied access to care, and many are successful. Look at Connor. By all accounts, he was mentally challenged (such prisoners were often assigned to Tamms because the IDOC did not have the ability or will to treat them). He had attempted suicide. He was ill.  
He should never have been placed with in a cell with another prisoner, particularly coming from the Tamms total isolation.
7. The placement of prisoners is problematic. Why was a non-violent offender like Leezer placed in a cell with an ill, mentally challenged prisoner convicted of

murder and who had committed an assault while in prison? Why was a known White racist placed in a cell with a Black man? This placement had to be the result of a series of administrative errors.

8. Public apathy about the poor condition of the Illinois prisons is reflected in the lack of interest by public officials and the public generally in this terrible situation. That apathy was reflected in the recent presidential campaign where neither candidate commented on the historic U.S. incarceration rates. That is one reason the system continues to decline.

9. Lack of funding. The State can no longer afford its bloated corrections system. Yet there is, as yet, no effective movement to reduce the current population.

10. But perhaps worst of all is Leezer's own history: a series of non-violent felonies in 16 short years after he turned 20, probably fueled by a narcotics addiction and emotional challenges. We know that a prisoner is supposed to be rehabilitated in prison and given good support on release. Apparently none of this happened with Leezer, a result that occurs all too often with prisoners serving short terms and who constitute the bulk of the recidivism statistics. One should not wonder why Illinois has a recidivism rate in excess of 50%.

Add to these observations the fact that the IDOC is underfunded, for the most part has no meaningful academic, vocational programs, and the inadequate post-release support. We truly have a system at odds with itself-one that cannot work.