

## Law Offices of Howard Friedman, P.C.

90 Canal Street, 5th Floor  
Boston, MA 02114-2022  
www.civil-rights-law.com

Telephone  
617-742-4100

Fax  
617-303-3938

Howard Friedman  
David Milton  
Drew Glassroth

August 7, 2015

William N. Brownsberger, Senate Chair  
John V. Fernandes, House Chair  
Members of the Joint Committee in the Judiciary  
Rooms 504 and 136  
State House  
Boston, MA 02133

**Re: Testimony in support of Bill H.3444 *with modifications***

Dear Chair Brownsberger, Chair Fernandes, and Members of the Joint Committee in the Judiciary:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Carmen Guhn-Knight. I am a paralegal at the Law Offices of Howard Friedman, the firm that challenged the Chicopee Jail's policy of letting male guards videotape strip searches of female prisoners. I am testifying in support of Bill H.3444, but I agree with David Milton, the prisoners' lawyer in the lawsuit, that the bill needs serious modifications.

The lawsuit against the Chicopee Jail was brought by the dedicated and tenacious former prisoner Debra Baggett, for herself and 175 others who were strip searched while being videotaped by a male officer. I have spoken to over 60 of these women about their experiences.

The women described being escorted to a segregation cell, either for disciplinary reasons or, about half the time, for mental health watch or protection. Up to four female guards remained in the cell and one gave instructions: Take off your clothes; lift your breasts; lift your stomach; bend over and cough, etc. Meanwhile, a male officer recorded the women with a handheld video camera. Many of the women say the male officer was looking at their naked body, either directly or through the camera.

The Chicopee Jail's own statistics show that more than 75% of female prisoners have been victims of abuse. Women with histories of sexual abuse told me of their heightened sensitivity to having their naked bodies video-recorded. They said they returned to their communities re-traumatized, and in some cases with PTSD due to being recorded during strip searches.

Here are just a few of the comments women made, often while in tears, in the videos of their strip searches:

- “Do we have to have the videotape? I don’t want to be videotaped naked. I don’t want to be filmed naked... I don’t want the camera on me.”
- “They’re videotaping. I’m not gonna take off my clothes... I’m not gonna take off my bra on that video camera.”
- “I don’t trust who’s on the camera.”
- “Is this going to end up on YouTube? ... I’m being filmed while everything’s off? I’m naked being filmed.”
- “I’m not going to get stripped in front of a camera, that’s pornography.”
- “[You] take someone’s dignity and then do it again with a camera.”
- “I’m not taking my clothes off, it’s so degrading... Can they like move the camera out of the room? This is so fucking degrading... I have to bend and cough with that camera right there?”

Despite their complaints, these women had no choice in the matter; they eventually removed their clothing themselves or were restrained while an officer removed their clothing.

This bill should prohibit all videotaping of strip searches. The women I spoke to were of course upset when men held the camera, but many were equally upset by all recorded strip searches, regardless of the gender of the camera operator. While you are vulnerable and naked as you manipulate your body parts for guards to view, to then also be videotaped is debasing and frightening, especially when you do not know how the tape will be stored and who else may view the video of your naked body. This is a justifiable fear, since some of the videotapes of strip searches at the Chicopee Jail are in fact missing. Videotaping strip searches is also unnecessary, as shown by the fact that the jail administrators admitted that they were unaware of any other jail or prison that videotaped strip searches.

In jails and prisons, strip searches are seen as a normal part of life, but they are intrinsically humiliating. Without a stronger bill limiting videotaping of strip searches, this unnecessary and degrading aspect of strip searches will continue to harm individuals and our communities.

Thank you.

Sincerely,



Carmen Guhn-Knight