

Man held in solitary because of blindness, lawsuit alleges

He says Wicomico detention center also denied him access to services

BY LAUREN KIRKWOOD

Lauren.Kirkwood@TheDailyRecord.com

A man who spent weeks in solitary confinement at the Wicomico County Detention Center is suing the county corrections department, alleging he was housed in solitary because he is blind and was denied a job and access to the jail's law library due to his disability.

Abdul Malik Muhammad was arrested for allegedly stealing food worth about \$175 from a supermarket and incarcerated at the detention center in September 2012.

According to his complaint, filed in U.S. District Court in Baltimore on Thursday, Muhammad was relegated to solitary confinement for about six weeks, where he had no access to showers, phone calls or recreation. The lawsuit alleges violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

"The harmful psychological effects of solitary confinement, including, but not limited to, hallucinations, hypersensitivity to noise and touch, insomnia and paranoia, uncontrollable feelings of rage and fear, distortions of time and perception, increased risk of suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder, are well known," the suit states. "For individuals like Mr. Muhammad who suffer from mental health issues, these effects are often magnified."

Matthew Peter of the Local Govern-

ment Insurance Trust in Hanover, an attorney for the Wicomico County Department of Corrections, did not immediately return a call seeking comment on the lawsuit on Monday.

Other than a handful of visits with a mental health provider, Muhammad had no contact with other people during his time in solitary, according to the lawsuit. He was also unable to access the library, commissary or religious services.

With no access to a telephone, Muhammad had no way of letting his family and friends know that he was in the detention center and could not request their help to make bail. When he asked a guard why he had been placed in solitary confinement, Muhammad alleged the guard said he was being kept there "because he was blind and [the department of corrections] was trying to determine where to house him."

Initial grievance

Muhammad filed a grievance with the department in October 2012. A few days later, he was moved out of solitary and into a special management unit with other inmates who had disabilities or illnesses.

He was released from detention in December, but less than a year later, Muhammad re-entered the detention center after violating the terms of his probation. He was held in solitary confinement for three days this time, and was then released again to the special unit.

Both times that he was incarcerated, Muhammad requested to be placed in the detention center's work program, which would have allowed him to shorten the length of his sentence, but the corrections department denied this request due to Muhammad's blindness, the suit alleges. According to the lawsuit, he voluntarily swept and mopped the hallway of the special management unit each morning and was capable of working.

Because the detention center's law library did not stock Braille law books or have computers with screen-access software capable of transmitting text into audio, Muhammad was also unable to adequately research a defense of his criminal case and determine how to challenge the way his sentence had been calculated, the suit alleges.

His request to be supplied with a slate and stylus to write in Braille was also denied, according to the complaint, so Muhammad had to barter with other inmates, offering them items from the commissary or food from his tray so that they would write court filings and letters for him.

Muhammad is represented by Daniel Goldstein and Jessica Weber of Brown, Goldstein & Levy LLP in Baltimore. Goldstein and Weber were both out of the office and unavailable for comment on Monday.

The case is *Abdul Malik Muhammad v. Wicomico County Department of Corrections*, 1:15-cv-02679-CCB.