

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

June 1, 2022

The Honorable Michael E. Horowitz  
Inspector General  
U.S. Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20530

Dear Inspector General Horowitz:

We respectfully request that your office immediately open an investigation into allegations included in a disturbing report published by NPR and the Marshall Project<sup>1</sup> concerning the deaths of seven incarcerated men and serious abuses by staff at the United States Penitentiary Thomson (USP Thomson) in Illinois.

Five of the deaths were reportedly the result of homicides by fellow Special Management Unit (SMU) residents; the remaining two were suicides. The article's most serious allegations include:

- Staff purposefully stoking tensions between cellmates and intentionally pairing men whom they knew would attack each other;
- Staff encouraging assaults against sex offenders and informants and falsely telling residents that a particular man was a sex offender, resulting in repeated physical and sexual assaults against him;
- Abusive shackling leaving scars known as “the Thomson tattoo,” sometimes in a room known as “the dungeon” or “the torture room,” where men would lie shackled to a bed for hours in their own urine and feces without food or water;
- The continuation of abusive behavior towards incarcerated persons after the SMU was transferred to USP Thomson;
- Punishment (often by shackling) of men who refused to be housed with cellmates whom they believed would kill them;
- The highest rate of pepper-spray usage in the Bureau of Prisons (BOP); and
- Staff laughing and joking at the expense of a Jewish man they were guarding as he lay dying in a hospital following an assault that occurred after staff placed him in a recreation cage with known white supremacists.

If these reports prove accurate, they describe conduct that would almost certainly contravene numerous BOP policies, as well as infringing the civil rights of individuals in BOP custody and possibly violating federal criminal statutes.

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<sup>1</sup>Christie Thompson and Joseph Shapiro, *How the Newest Federal Prison Became One of the Deadliest*, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2022/05/31/how-the-newest-federal-prison-became-one-of-the-deadliest>; <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/31/1100954134/federal-prison-deaths-usp-thomson-illinois-prison> (May 31, 2022).

The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) is responsible for protecting the integrity of Department of Justice components, including BOP, as well as the health and safety of the people in BOP custody. The NPR and Marshall Project report raises serious and troubling allegations about the conduct of staff at USP Thomson.

As such, it is imperative that you investigate the allegations detailed in the NPR and Marshall Project report, as well as any other allegations of abusive or dangerous conditions at USP Thomson that arise in the course of your investigation. In particular, we request that your investigation include the role that staffing shortages may have played in giving rise to the conditions in which the deaths and alleged abuses occurred. We have long fought to address the staffing crisis at USP Thomson and throughout BOP, repeatedly warning that failure to do so could result in catastrophe. We are deeply troubled that these warnings seem to have proved accurate.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. We look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin  
Chair, Senate Committee on the Judiciary



Tammy Duckworth  
United States Senator



Cheri Bustos  
Member of Congress