



# WASHINGTON window

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The District of Columbia and the Maryland Counties of  
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## Jailhouse justice

### Grassroots group lobbies for jail population cap

By Lucy Chumbley

On Dec. 11, 2002, while awaiting trial at the D.C. Jail, Givon Pendleton was stabbed nine times in the dining room of the Southeast 1 cellblock and bled to death on the floor.

Pendleton, whose trial was to have taken place the next day, never got a chance to plead his case. But since his violent death, his mother, Pearl Beale, has been working tirelessly to ensure that no mother's child will suffer harm or injustice at the D.C. Jail.

On Oct. 4, Beale marched

with the Coalition for Justice at the D.C. Jail - a grassroots organization formed by the Rev.

Nancy James, an associate priest at St. John's, Lafayette Square, and the Rev. John Graham, rector of Grace, Georgetown - from St. John's to the Mayor's office to demand that the District abide by the Jail Improvement Act of 2003.

The law requires that the District establish a cap on the jail population, institute regular inspections and hear quarterly reports of grievances, among other measures which have not yet been put into place.

"There are no excuses for it," said Douglas R. Sparks, who

is Beale's attorney and a board member of the D.C. Prisoners Legal Service Project. "It's a pure and simple matter. There's not one single day since the law's been signed that the jail has been in compliance. How can you expect anyone in the jail to have respect for the law when the jailers disregard it with impunity?"

The interfaith coalition hopes to pressure the D.C. government into abiding by its own law by raising public awareness of conditions at the jail and acting as a watchdog.

"When jails know that they're being watched, they're usually a bit more careful," said James, who has counseled inmates and recently wrote a book about her experience titled, *Standing in the Whirlwind*.

"People need to understand that this is an important issue," said Philip Fornaci, executive director of the D.C. Prisoners' Legal Services Project. "This affects all of us and it affects our communities. This is not how we want to keep people. This is not how we want to treat people."

Before the march to the Mayor's office, a group of about 30 assembled at St. John's for a short ecumenical service. James read the names of eight people who have been murdered at the jail since

the law came into effect and offered prayers for their families.

"We put names, places and dates on their deaths," she said. "We take away the anonymity of their suffering."

The group brought its message to the streets, carrying a banner inscribed "Justice for the D.C. Jail" to the Mayor's office and singing those words to the tune of "We Shall Overcome."

At city hall, the marchers met with Edward D. Reiskin, deputy mayor for safety and justice, to discuss conditions at the jail and urge the city to comply with the law.

Volunteers, chaplains and a registered nurse spoke of the overcrowded and miserable conditions at the jail that make it a Petri dish for violence.

Catholic chaplain Lou Schwartz, known to the inmates as Brother Bob, described the jail as "totally dysfunctional - it's a shame on the city of D.C."

Basic hygiene items like toilet paper, toothbrushes and soap are in short supply, he said, and with no outlet for their energy, inmates pass the time by making noise. "All they do is just yell and scream and holler. It's insane."

"I've seen people begging for toilet tissues," he said. "There's a daily issue where people are throwing human feces at each other."

Edith Geraldine Watson, a registered nurse who spent nine years at the jail as both an employee and a volunteer spoke of outbreaks of boils and staff infections and said that when it rained, feces came up through the drains in the prison floor.

"It's tearfully sad. It breaks your heart," Schwartz said. "These are your citizens. These are our children."

"There seems to be either an inertia or a will not to do anything," said Eleanor Judah, a volunteer Catholic chaplain who has ministered at the jail for 5 years. "I'm glad the Episcopal Church has taken a responsibility."

"There's no question there's no excuse for our not protecting the people in our charge, regardless of the reason for their being there," Reiskin said, after hearing testimonies from many of the marchers. While he conceded that "we are near the upper edge of our comfort zone," with the jail population, he said this did not cause violent behavior, stating that "levels of violence have gone down, not up."

During his term, Reiskin said, Mayor Anthony Williams has invested more than \$50 million in the jail, and is continuously working to improve the programming there. In addition, the jail's kitchen was recently renovated, he said, and received a commendation through

the American Correctional Association accreditation process.

Although the Oct. 4 meeting failed to extract any promises for establishing a population cap at the jail from the city, members of the coalition are not giving up their campaign. After the march, they were preparing to testify before the City Council on Oct. 24, and will continue to work to raise awareness of conditions at the jail.

And one mother will continue her fight for justice.

"My tears still flow and my questions still go unanswered," Beale said. "How can something this devastating happen in a secure and supposedly safe environment?"

"When my son was stabbed there were no guards. No guards noticed anything happened. He was stabbed nine times, and as he lay bleeding to death, no one came to his aid."

"I've been through all the stages of grief and now I'm angry. All my tears won't bring my son back, but there are mothers that have daughters and sons in the D.C. Jail and I don't want this to happen to them."

For more information about the Coalition for Justice at the D.C. Jail, contact the Rev. John Graham at 202/333-7100.

