

# PRISONERS' STRUGGLERS

## Prison Legal News: Advocating for Prisoners' Rights for 25 Years *Alex Friedmann*

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Founded in 1990 in a Washington state prison cell by Paul Wright and Ed Mead, *Prison Legal News* is a monthly print publication, which has been in print for almost 25 years. The journal covers news and legal issues involving prisons, jails, and criminal justice-related topics with an emphasis on prisoners' rights.

The first issue of PLN was hand-typed, photocopied and ten pages long. It was mailed to 75 potential subscribers. At the time PLN had a budget of \$50. The first three issues were banned in all Washington prisons, the first 18 in all Texas prisons.

Now a 64-page magazine, PLN reports on a broad range of issues that include prison labour, rape and sexual abuse, the misconduct of prison and jail staff, prisoners' constitutional rights, medical and mental health care, disenfranchisement, rehabilitation and recidivism, prison privatization, prison and jail phone rates, prison censorship, the death penalty, solitary confinement and control units, civil litigation against prison and jail officials, criminal justice politics and policies, wrongful convictions, and much more. Around 70 percent of PLN's approximately 9,000 subscribers are incarcerated. PLN is now a project of the Human Rights Defense Center (HRDC), a non-profit based in Lake Worth, Florida.

Paul Wright, HRDC's executive director, served 17 years prior to his release from the Washington prison system in 2003. He edited and published PLN for over a decade while incarcerated. PLN's managing editor, Alex Friedmann, served 10 years behind bars, and all of PLN's contributing writers are current or former prisoners. The organization has 14 full-time staff members with offices in three states.

PLN is unique in many respects. It is the only independent, uncensored national magazine edited and produced largely by prisoners and former prisoners. It is also the longest-running publication devoted to prisoners' rights in American history. Unlike the vast majority of the mainstream media, PLN challenges the censorship of PLN's publications and books sent to prisoners by prison and jail officials. Further, PLN is one of a few publications that offer a class-based analysis of the criminal justice system.

HRDC and PLN are dedicated to protecting the human rights of people held in detention facilities, and oppose the exploitation of prisoners and their loved ones. PLN has reported extensively on the prison industrial complex, prison slave labor, the so-called war on drugs, racial and socioeconomic disparities in the criminal justice system, and the privatization of correctional services. HRDC and PLN believe that prisons should be reserved only for those who need to be incarcerated because they pose a threat to the public, that prisoners should be treated humanely and provided with effective rehabilitative programs, and that correctional services should not be privatized or monetized.

PLN distributes a number of self-help and educational books for prisoners, including titles such as the *Prisoners' Self-Help Litigation Manual* and *Protecting Your Health and Safety*, as well as three anthologies of PLN articles. Additionally, PLN has published three books: *The Habeas Citebook*, *Prisoners' Guerrilla Handbook to Correspondence Programs in the United States and Canada* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), and most recently, *The Disciplinary Self-Help Litigation Manual* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.).

Over the years, PLN has aggressively defended its First Amendment right to send its monthly publication and books to prisoners, litigating challenges to censorship by prison and jail officials nationwide. As a result, ten state prison systems and numerous jails are under consent decrees or court orders to ensure that prisoners can receive PLN and other publications. HRDC's litigation project remains a priority, as prison and jail officials continue to engage in unjustified and unconstitutional censorship.

Further, PLN litigates public records cases against local, state, and federal agencies that refuse to comply with public records laws and the *Freedom of Information Act*. It has brought groundbreaking, successful lawsuits against private prison companies, including Corrections Corporation of America and the GEO Group, that do not comply with public records requests even though they are the functional equivalents of public agencies.

HRDC has also represented prisoners and their family members in wrongful death suits, including cases where prisoners have died as a result of suicide, homicide, and medical neglect. HRDC employs a general counsel, staff attorneys, and paralegals and co-counsels with law firms nationwide.

PLN received the First Amendment Award from the Society of Professional Journalists in 2013, and has continued to publish comprehensive

articles on all aspects of the criminal justice system. For example, last year, PLN's cover stories included an extensive exposé on Corizon Health, the nation's largest for-profit prison medical care provider; coverage of violence in Georgia's prison system; an interview with Noam Chomsky; an article on the murder of Colorado's corrections director and resulting reforms in the state's prison system; PLN's successful lawsuit on behalf of the family of a Washington prisoner who died due to gross medical neglect; and an examination of the pervasive problem of prosecutorial misconduct.

In addition to litigation, book publishing and distribution, and publishing *Prison Legal News*, HRDC has long engaged in advocacy efforts relating to prisoners' rights and criminal justice reform. In 2011, PLN co-founded the national Campaign for Prison Phone Justice to reduce the high cost of phone calls made by prisoners. Following extensive lobbying by HRDC, the campaign and allied organizations, the Federal Communications Commission voted to cap the cost of interstate prison phone calls in 2013, and is currently considering similar rate caps for intrastate calls. HRDC continues to help lead the fight to reform the prison phone industry.

HRDC staff members have spoken at hundreds of conferences, conventions, and similar events, have been quoted extensively in news media ranging from *The New York Times* and CNN to the *Wall Street Journal* and Politico, and have appeared on numerous radio and TV news shows, as well as in documentaries. PLN has submitted written testimony to Congress on subjects that include solitary confinement and the school-to-prison pipeline. HRDC staff members have testified before a congressional committee and state legislative committees on criminal justice issues, and were instrumental in having *the Private Prison Information Act* introduced last year. HRDC has filed formal comments with government agencies, including the National Prison Rape Elimination Commission, EEOC, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, and departments of corrections at the state-level. Further, HRDC's litigation project has joined amicus briefs on numerous occasions.

HRDC receives no government funding and currently does not receive any foundation funding. Instead, the organization is funded by donations and income from PLN subscriptions, book sales, advertising, and its litigation project. PLN's website contains the most extensive collection of criminal justice-related articles, publications, and legal documents on the internet.

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