

# Assaults on officers spur suits

## Group helps win cases against inmates for attacks that injure prison workers

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**Posted:** Sunday October 17th, 2004, 10:05 PM

**Last Updated:** Sunday October 17th, 2004, 10:07 PM

When inmate Clarence Howard pulled Correctional Officer Jeremy Nunley's arm through the hole in the door officers use to pass food through, Nunley only suffered a few scrapes on his right forearm.

But it could have been a lot worse, Nunley said. Howard could have easily broken Nunley's arm. Ever since that day in March, Nunley said he's been worried his arm will get pulled through by another inmate, and he'll get really hurt this time.

"You never know when one of these inmates might have a bad day and take it out on you," Nunley said.

Nunley is one of five Tehachapi State Prison staff members who won lawsuits against inmates this October for assaulting them. Nunley, and the four other plaintiffs, were awarded \$5,000 each in a Mojave small-claims court.

It's all part of the work of a year-old organization called California Staff Assaults Task Force, which boasts more than 5,000 members, all employees of California prisons.

"Inmates don't seem to mind doing time," said Sgt. Allen Blaylock, who also won a judgment against an inmate who assaulted him at the Tehachapi prison. "When you touch their pocket book, they pay attention."

Blaylock was hurt when he was removing contraband from inmate Gregory Perez's cell in January. Perez injured Blaylock and Officer Nancy Williams, who also sued Perez and won \$5,000.

Williams suffered a nose bleed, a black eye and a cut above her eye from being hit by the back of Perez's head while restraining him.

Blaylock's most serious injuries came when the prison gunner, aiming for Perez, accidentally hit Blaylock in his side with a rubber bullet and he fell into a table.

A fourth Tehachapi correctional officer, Dan Johnson, sued an inmate for punching him in the right temple. Johnson said in court that the assault gave him excruciating headaches and emotional distress.

"I've lost a lot of sleep over this," Johnson said in court.

The idea of the lawsuits is to make the inmates accountable, especially those serving long sentences. They often don't care if time is added or if that time is done in security housing, said Lt. Charles Hughes executive director of the organization.

"We (the Department of Corrections) do a terrible job holding these guys accountable," Hughes said.

Hughes said that correctional officers know they are going into a relatively dangerous profession and will be working with criminals, but he added that that doesn't mean it's right for the officers to be abused.

Hughes said that while the \$5,000 doesn't mean a lot to the officers -- most inmates won't be able to pay more than a few dollars a month anyway -- it can make a world of difference to the inmate.

The payment may come out of the inmates' trust accounts, the money they use to buy things like toothbrushes, cookies, or special items

like TVs or radios, through the prison store.

Don Spector, the executive director of the prisoners' rights group the Prison Law Office, doesn't believe the suits will deter any assaults and thinks taking away the inmates' means of getting things like deodorant and shampoo is just mean.

"It just seems very spiteful. They're not interested in getting compensated for their injuries so much as they want to punish the prisoners more," Spector said. "Once they've taken that away (the trust account), there's no incentive at all to behave."

The correctional officers don't automatically win the cases though.

The inmates have lots of opportunities to plead their side of the story.

The inmates came to court in only one of the seven cases the group has won so far, Hughes said. But they can have someone appear for them, or send in written defense if they want.

"The judges will bend over backwards to let them have their due process," Hughes said.

Hughes said he wishes every inmate could sit in court when the settlement is decided.

"The inmates are making choices to hurt us, stab us, kill us, infect us and it's wrong," Hughes said.