



PENNSYLVANIA INSTITUTIONAL LAW PROJECT

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Eric McGill and Leonttay Pratt finally freed from solitary confinement after Lebanon County eliminates policy that banned wearing dreadlocks as religious practice.

PHILADELPHIA, PA – The Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project (PILP) is pleased to announce that, thanks to the perseverance of our clients Eric S. McGill, Jr. and Leonttay Pratt, Lebanon County Correctional Facility (LCCF) is now allowing incarcerated people to wear their hair in dreadlocks for religious reasons. Mr. McGill and Mr. Pratt, who are Rastafarian, have been freed from the torturous conditions of solitary confinement, which they were held in solely because they refused to cut off their dreadlocks. Mr. McGill entered solitary confinement in January 2019 and Mr. Pratt had been held for over four months.

PILP asserted that Lebanon County's practice of punishing people who refuse to cut their dreadlocks, without allowing for religious exemptions, violated the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA).

Mr. McGill reflected on his long struggle to practice his faith without punishment while awaiting trial, "I feel like I did the right thing. I made a difference not just for me but for others who didn't have a voice."

"We are relieved that LCCF has taken the right action and moved our clients to general population. This policy change ensures that in the future people will not be wrongfully subjected to solitary confinement for practicing their religious beliefs." stated Alexandra Morgan-Kurtz, managing attorney with PILP

While this new policy protects the rights of incarcerated people to wear dreadlocks for religious reasons, it does not address the larger issue that Lebanon County still bans dreadlocks when people have them for reasons other than religion. Contrary to Lebanon County's assertions, dreadlocks do not present inherent security or cleanliness concerns. Indeed, dozens of jail and prison systems across the United States permit incarcerated people to have dreadlocks. "The new policy still irrationally targets a primarily black hairstyle," stated Matthew A. Feldman, staff attorney with PILP. "We will continue to pursue a court order removing this arbitrary, racist distinction between black hairstyles and other long hair."

More information is available at pailp.org/news

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