

# CREATIVETIME REPORTS

FEATURE

## Tamms Is Torture: The Campaign to Close an Illinois Supermax Prison

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*In January 2013, Illinois' Tamms "supermax" prison closed its doors after 15 years of operation, during which hundreds of men were held in solitary confinement indefinitely. Here's how artists, writers and the families of prisoners shut down the notorious facility.*



## Illinois Lost Its Head

In 1998, Illinois opened a prison without a yard, cafeteria, classrooms or chapel. Tamms Supermax was designed for just one purpose: sensory deprivation. No phone calls, communal activities or contact visits were allowed. Men could only leave their cells to shower or exercise alone in a concrete pen. Food was pushed through a slot in the door. The consequences of isolation were predictable: many men fell into severe depression, experienced hallucinations, compulsively cut their bodies or attempted suicide.

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*Tamms Supermax was designed for just one purpose: sensory deprivation.*

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The first men at Tamms were transferred there from other prisons around the state for a one-year shock treatment intended to break down disruptive prisoners and make them more compliant. But the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) left them there indefinitely. A decade later, more than a third of the men at Tamms had been there since it opened, and for no apparent reason.

Research has shown that supermax prisons don't reduce prison violence or rehabilitate prisoners. On the contrary, isolation induces or exacerbates mental illness, creates stress and tension, worsens behavior and undermines the ability of people to function once they get out.

Despite its uselessness as a form of correction, Tamms had many strong supporters: the powerful union to which the prison guards belonged, the nearby towns that welcomed the well-paid jobs, and state officials who thrived on tough-on-crime politics. They all deployed a single phrase meant to paralyze any possible dissenters: *the worst of the worst*. This slogan was applied to the men at Tamms to suggest they deserved the worst possible treatment—long-term solitary confinement that human rights monitors uniformly describe as cruel, inhuman and degrading, if not outright torture. Challenging this label and this punishment became the project of Tamms Year Ten, a campaign launched in 2008, a decade after the supermax opened.

## Punching Above Our Weight

Two years earlier, a group of Chicago artists, poets and musicians formed the Tamms Poetry Committee. Two of them, Laurie Jo Reynolds included, had been members of a group that had protested plans to construct the supermax. Following the practice of two women who sent holiday cards to the prison, we sent letters and poems to every man at Tamms to provide them with some social contact. Their replies demonstrated the necessity of this project: "*Hi Committee, is this for real? I can't believe someone cares enough to send a pick-*



me-up to the worst-of-the-worst. Well, if nobody else has said it, I will: THANK YOU." But we quickly found ourselves deluged with pleas for help: "Hey, this poetry is great, but could you please tell the governor what they're doing to us down here?"



By 2008, we had connected with men on the outside who had spent years in Tamms and family members of current prisoners. Together, we launched the Tamms Year Ten campaign. Our goal was to educate the public about Tamms and hold the IDOC, legislators and then-Governor Blagojevich accountable for the use of long-term isolation. Prison reform is hard enough, but getting people to stand up for “the worst of the worst” was considered hopeless. Attorneys and veteran prisoner advocates warned that this campaign could endanger the men and

increase support for the prison. But we believed that recent controversy over solitary confinement and torture at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib opened a new space for debate. And in any case, after a decade of isolation with no end in sight, the men in Tamms didn’t have much to lose.

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### **Outrage Properly Directed**

It was hard to know where to begin. Not many people had even heard of Tamms, located at the southern tip of Illinois, 360 miles from Chicago. Our members consulted with legislators from all over the state and sought advice from every quarter. A turning point was meeting Julie Hamos, an Evanston legislator known as a problem-solver. Her moral outrage was gratifying: “Ten years? This is unacceptable.” She felt that the best strategy was to force the IDOC to publicly justify itself. But that meant we had to have enough information to stand up to intransigent prison officials and law-and-order politicians. So we read, researched, filed Freedom of Information Act requests, extracted data from the public record and gathered statements from prisoners and their family members.

On April 28, 2008, our friend, the late Representative Eddie Washington from Waukegan, chaired public hearings on Tamms to focus legislators’ attention on the issue. We were supported by attorneys who had litigated on behalf of men at Tamms with mental illness. The testimony was often wrenching, but the IDOC was unmoved. Nevertheless, the sheer size of the audience—more than a hundred people came out—catapulted our legislative campaign. Through forums, lobby days, press conferences, rallies, prayer vigils and parsley-eating contests, we gained the support of 70 organizations and 27 legislators for a reform bill sponsored by Hamos. She also initiated roundtable discussions between Tamms Year Ten, the IDOC and legislators. The highlight of these meetings was seeing the real experts—the men recently released from Tamms—confront their former captors.



### **When Opportunities Are Seized, They Multiply**

In 2009, the stars began to align. Amnesty International issued a statement condemning the conditions at Tamms as “harsh,” “unnecessarily punitive” and “incompatible with the USA’s obligations to provide humane treatment for all prisoners.” The organization contacted Illinois state officials, urging them to support our reform legislation. So did Human Rights Watch. Then Representative Luis Arroyo encouraged us to present our case to the House Appropriations Committee during its annual review of the IDOC budget. He opened the session with remarks about how international human rights monitors—and his own constituents—wanted the torture at Tamms to end. The hearing became a referendum on the supermax.

A month later, and just a year after the campaign went public, our new governor, Pat Quinn, announced he was replacing the IDOC chief with a reform-minded director whose first task was to review the supermax. This was followed by a *Belleville News Democrat* exposé that described men at Tamms with untreated schizophrenia and knots of scar tissue from self-mutilation. It also documented cases in which men entered Tamms with short sentences but wound up with life terms because of their mental illnesses. Their investigation revealed that more than half the men at Tamms had never even committed an offense in another prison. Amnesty released another, more strongly worded statement asserting that “the conditions at the supermax flout international standards for humane treatment.” In September 2009, the IDOC director announced a 10-

point plan for reform that included an improvement in conditions, meaningful due process hearings and an administrative review of each man in Tamms. We had cracked the nut.

### **Torture Is a Crime, Not a Career**

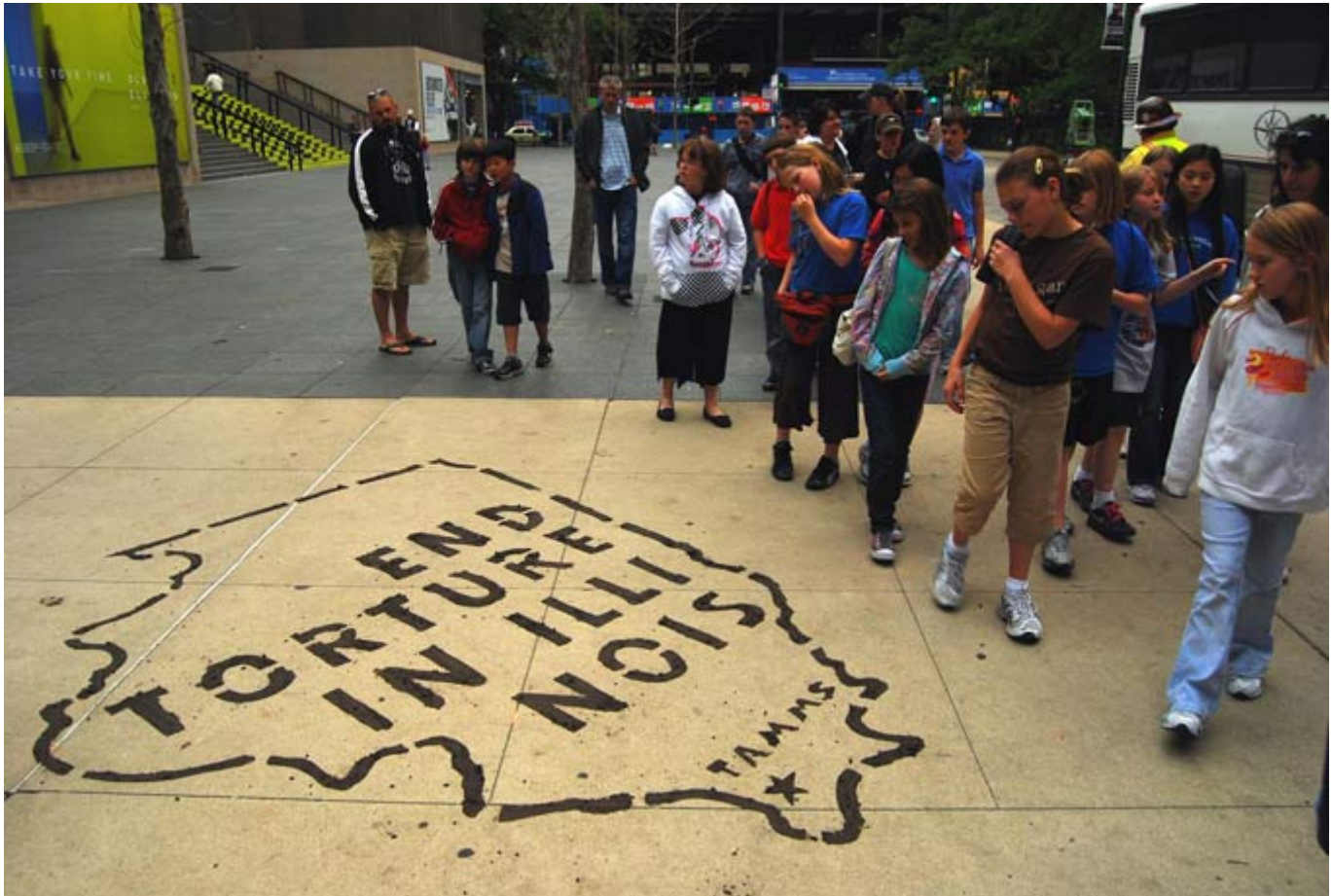
By 2011, the promised reforms were stalled, in spite of a new federal court ruling that men at Tamms had been deprived of their due process rights. But at just this point, Representative Arroyo became Chair of the House Appropriations Committee, and pushed not for *the reform*, but for *the closure of Tamms*. And in February 2012, Governor Quinn followed suit due to the state's budget crisis and human rights concerns. In response, downstate legislators and the guards' union (AFSCME) orchestrated a scare campaign, falsely asserting that closing Tamms would make the prison system more dangerous. Family members, outraged by the union's shamelessness, responded: "Torture is a crime, it shouldn't be a career." The battle played out in the media, the courtroom and especially the budgeting process. Last year was considered "one of the most contentious episodes in the history of Illinois penitentiaries" and the mothers, sisters, nieces, children and spouses of Tamms prisoners were at the forefront of the struggle to shut the supermax down. They lobbied legislators weekly in Springfield and led marches and rallies in Chicago.

Illinois has no private prisons and a Democratic supermajority in both chambers, yet it is notoriously difficult to close any state facility. We don't have 50,000 people in prison because of an amorphous "prison industrial complex" hell-bent on selling uniforms, steel doors and honey buns. This state's mass incarceration can be explained by a powerful guards union, Democratic legislators beholden to it, downstate legislators zealous to protect jobs in their districts, and mass media that promote fear-based policies. It takes guts to close a prison anywhere, but it is especially hard in Illinois. Yet Governor Quinn exemplified true leadership and closed Tamms on January 4, 2013. He chose fiscal prudence over pork-barrel spending; evidence-based policies over myth and fear; and human rights over vengeance.

### **Why Artists?**

Artists were fundamental to the campaign to close Tamms. Accustomed to attempting the impossible, artists are well qualified to affect law and policy. And compared to the typical political players, they have the freedom of the outsider: they are in the world, but not of it.

For centuries, artists have been concerned with systems of ratio, perspective, symmetry, geometry, anatomy, tactility and optics. For the last 50 years, they have taken on ecology, real estate, advertising, media, cybernetic, genetic, language, gender, racial and class systems. As political artists with real-world political goals, we need to engage with government systems. That's legislative art. Prison policies are made by the



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state, so you go to the state to change them.

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It is therefore fitting that the Tamms Year Ten office—filled with five years of files, fact sheets and ephemera—became an art exhibition in the Sullivan Galleries at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago last year. It served as the hub of the Tamms closure campaign, on view and in action, without any division between art and politics.

This campaign required the endurance, commitment and even obsession characteristic of an artistic practice, as well as the faith and unity of hundreds of people working together. Tamms prisoners sent critical information, galvanizing testimony and prayers. Men once active in rival gangs publicly spoke side by side

# INTERFAITH PRAYER VIGIL

## TAMMS SUPERMAX

**We Pray For:** - a fair and just solution at Tamms - treatment for the mentally ill  
- safety for correctional officers - peace for all victims



TEN  
CORRECTIONS  
I MAKE NO FALSE ASSERTION  
THAT MEN GO TO TAMMS  
ONLY FOR VIOLENCE AND  
DISRUPTIONS  
II ACCEPT NOT SAY AS FALSE

TAMMS  
SHOCKS THE  
CONSCIENCE

DO NOT  
TAMMS  
DESTROYS  
LIVES



HUMAN RIGHTS  
OVER  
VENGEANCE  
THANK YOU  
Governor  
Qui



about the damage of isolation. Even families of men no longer in the supermax lobbied for sons left behind. Artists lent their skills, advocates issued statements, attorneys battled in court—and principled public officials stood their ground. Those who had stumbled alone for years forged a collective path. Out of isolation came solidarity.

We are enthusiastic about legislative art because it is engaging, unpredictable and rewarding. But mainly because it is necessary.

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*Below are a selection from among dozens of letters written by men after they were transferred out of Tamms, thanking Tamms Year Ten volunteers for their help in closing the supermax.*

1-4-13

Tamms Year Ten:

To my brothers and sisters by another Mother I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your tireless effort and indefatigable labor in moving the Mountain of the state with nothing but teaspoons and chopsticks and paperclips you showed that faith alone is enough to move great obstacles when they are only standing upon sandy ground. I don't often get pictures and the few I get are my most cherished possessions because they are memories that come from the heart and are as warm and vibrant as a hug and a kiss. I want to thank you for that group picture and that great and wonderful card that was drawn by a child whose hands of generosity lifted the gloom from my eyes so that I could see the light of Heaven shining down upon me. You have given me great strength and forbearance so that the future is a welcome mat to a greater and brighter and promising creation of our will to raise up a New World devoted to people doing good things for each other.

Standing here now with Tamms finally closed, I feel a long awaited sense of freedom. I'm not saying that my transition here wasn't hard because it was but I think all change is difficult. I have a tough time conversing with people (it's easier to write my words down on paper) and getting used to the noise around me is a challenge (so many voices make me nervous) but all in all, I like it better. The officers are nicer and more attentive. The counselors too. We get more movement. It was nice to share the yard with another persons. We played basketball. (I won)

There are no words I know of that can adequately express how grateful I am for you all and the work you've done. You people are truly angels and I sincerely love each and everyone of you. I pray daily that God blesses ya'll in everything you do. If I can do anything for you please feel free to write me.

Being in tammis felt like being held underwater and drowning, not being able to breathe.

Leaving that place was as if you suddenly come up for air.

You're gulping in air.

You feel alive and real again.

Every step of the journey of transitioning from tammis has been a revelation of things both big and small.

Our natural human senses, having been so repressed at tammis

I think back when I first heard of the "Tamms Poetry Committee." I thought I needed to read a poem like I needed a 25<sup>th</sup> hour in a day to spend in that box! Who would have known though, through patience, steadfastness & perseverance, such an innocuous sounding group would transform into this mighty dynamo that would eventually shut down a Supermax prison! Amazing.

Sadly, I believe the ones to benefit the most from this will be those who will never have to go to Tamms. For those who spent time there, they are damaged on some level, to some degree. While none of us will ever be the same, some are broken beyond repair.

I'm still in prison,  
but it feels like I am  
free.

Former Jamms inmate

J. Padilla THANK  
YOU!

I'm still readjusting to this  
new environment after 8 years  
in Jamms.

It's much better though.

Former Jamms inmate

J. Padilla THANK YOU!

Thank you for all of your  
support. It wouldn't have  
happened without you.

Former Jamms inmate

Juan Padilla

Hey, I can actually shake  
my neighbors hand. It was  
surreal.

LOVE AND MANY THANKS!

Former Jamms inmate

Juan Padilla

It's amazing the little things  
we take for granted in life.

I finally have my own nail  
clippers. A regular size writing pen  
and toothbrush. With love & thanks.

Former Jamms inmate J. Padilla

I haven't worn pants or shirts  
in years. Forget what size I am.

Sort of funny. 😊

THANKS AND Blessing to everyone!

Former Jamms inmate

J. Padilla

Some claim that we were the "worst  
of the worst".

Jamms A.D. inmates ~~are~~ the best  
behaved in Portiac.

Former Jamms inmate.

J. Padilla

Forever  
Greatful!

The stress has been lifted on all  
of us. you can feel it.

LOVE AND GRATITUDE!

Former Jamms inmate

J. Padilla



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*“Tamms Is Torture” is part of an ongoing Creative Time Reports series on U.S. prison reform, which also includes dispatches on solitary confinement from filmmaker Angad Bhalla and photographer Christoph Gielen. This piece, commissioned by Creative Time Reports, has also been published by Alternet and TruthOut. You can view more of the “Photo Requests from Solitary” featured above via The Daily Beast.*