



Suicide Exposes Squalor in Texas Prison

**Suicide Shows Squalid Conditions in Privately-Run Texas Prison;
Company Operates in 15 States**

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By JOHN MILLER/ Associated Press

After months alone in his cell, Scot Noble Payne finished 20 pages of letters, describing to loved ones the decrepit conditions of the prison where he was serving time for molesting a child. Then Payne used a razor blade to slice two 3-inch gashes in his throat. Guards found his body in the cell's shower, with the water still running.

"Try to comfort my mum too and try to get her to see that I am truly happy again," he wrote his uncle. "I tell you, it sure beats having water on the floor 24/7, a smelly pillow case, sheets with blood stains on them and a stinky towel that hasn't been changed since they caught me."

Payne's suicide on March 4 came seven months after he was sent to the squalid privately run Texas prison by Idaho authorities trying to ease inmate overcrowding in their own state. His death exposed what had been Idaho's standard practice for dealing with inmates sent to out-of-state prisons: Out of sight, out of mind.

It also raised questions about a company hired to operate prisons in 15 states, despite reports of abusive guards and terrible sanitation.

Hundreds of pages of documents obtained by The Associated Press through an open-records request show Idaho did little monitoring of out-of-state inmates, despite repeated complaints from prisoners, their families and a prison inspector.

More than 140,000 U.S. prison beds are in private hands, and inmates' rights groups allege many such penitentiaries tolerate deplorable conditions and skimp on services to increase profits.

"They cut corners because the bottom line is making money," said Caylor Rolling, prison program director at Partnership for Safety and Justice in Portland, Ore., a group that promotes prison alternatives.

Payne, 43, was placed in solitary confinement because he escaped from the prison in December by scaling a fence and eluding capture for a week.

He was among Idaho inmates sent to the prison in Spur, Texas, run by a Florida-based company called the GEO Group. The business operates more than 50 prisons across the United States as well as in Australia and South Africa.

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