

1 rape and I'd ask the two of you to identify  
2 yourselves in turn and please present your  
3 statements to us.

4 We welcome you and we thank you for your  
5 willingness to appear and make public statements on  
6 this issue.

7 I'm sorry, we need to swear you in. Would you  
8 stand?

9 SURVIVOR TESTIMONY

10 (Survivor members sworn.)

11 MS. RAGSDALE: Good morning. My name is  
12 Dana Ragsdale and I am pleased to be here this  
13 morning. I want to thank you for giving me the  
14 opportunity to share my story with you.

15 My experience is different because I was not  
16 sexually assaulted while in prison. Instead, I was  
17 a survivor of sexual abuse prior to entering  
18 prison, and I reported to prison staff person for  
19 sexual misconduct. Apparently, I was not taken  
20 seriously because a number of women were assaulted  
21 by this corrections officer long after the report  
22 was made. I hope that my experience dealing with

1           the repercussions of sexual assault in the federal  
2           detention system helps the National Prison Rape  
3           Elimination Commission to create better policies  
4           for protecting prisoners from sexual misconduct,  
5           ensuring the reports of misconduct are taken  
6           seriously and ensuring the prosecution of staff who  
7           abuse inmates in this way.

8           In the late summer of 2003, I was imprisoned  
9           at the Federal Detention Center (the F.D.C.) in  
10          Philadelphia as part of a work cadre. The work  
11          cadre was made up of a group of women inmates  
12          designated by the BOP to perform various prison  
13          work projects.

14          Early on in my time at the facility, I became  
15          aware of custodial sexual misconduct when a female  
16          inmate confided in me and said that she had been  
17          sexually assaulted by a male corrections officer,  
18          Theodore Woodson, who supervised inmates working in  
19          the commissary. As a former victim of sexual  
20          abuse, I was terrified and shocked.

21          Around the same time, I found out that a  
22          different corrections officer at the F.D.C. was

1 under investigation for sexual misconduct. I felt  
2 extremely unsafe and I did not know what to do  
3 about what this woman had told me. I wanted to  
4 tell someone, but I knew that inmates who file  
5 reports against corrections officials are usually  
6 put into isolation. I did not want to be put in  
7 the special housing unit, lose my privileges or  
8 spend nearly every hour of the day in my cell.  
9 Inmates who make reports are often labeled as  
10 snitches and risk retaliation by corrections  
11 officers or other inmates. I stayed silent and  
12 prayed that I would not be victimized.

13 I was relieved when I was transferred out of  
14 the F.D.C. in Philadelphia and sent to the Federal  
15 Corrections Institute in Danbury, Connecticut, as I  
16 trusted that it would be a safer environment.

17 During my orientation, the warden held an  
18 assembly where she talked about sexual misconduct  
19 and assured the inmates that the institution would  
20 take any allegations of abuse very seriously. She  
21 went on to state that there had been about five  
22 recent substantiated cases of sexual abuse of

1 inmates. I was frightened when she stated that  
2 this was occurring at the institution, but felt  
3 encouraged that it was being taken seriously.  
4 Although the warden did not explain specifically  
5 how we were to report any problems, I presumed that  
6 telling any of the corrections personnel or their  
7 supervisors would be sufficient to initiate an  
8 investigation.

9 The abuses by the corrections officer at the  
10 F.D.C. in Philadelphia continued to weigh heavily  
11 on my conscience, but I did not feel safe making a  
12 report. I knew that it was not a good idea to be  
13 seen speaking with corrections officials, as other  
14 inmates might assume that they were being  
15 "snitched" on for something they had done, so I  
16 initially kept quiet. I was assigned to work for  
17 Lieutenant Gussiak cleaning his office. Because I  
18 felt relatively comfortable around him, and I was  
19 able to speak with him in the more private  
20 environment of his office, I began to consider  
21 making a report to him. At the same time, I also  
22 spoke with a therapist at the prison. I told him

1           what I knew about the sexual abuses at the Federal  
2           Detention Center in Philadelphia, and he suggested  
3           that I make a formal report.

4                     One day while I was working, I asked  
5           Lieutenant Gussiak what someone should do if they  
6           happened to find out about custodial sexual  
7           misconduct. He realized that I was hinting at  
8           something specific and asked me what I knew. He  
9           then brought in a witness so that I could make a  
10          statement. I still had some worry that because  
11          Lieutenant Gussiak and Officer Woodson were both  
12          employees of the Bureau of Prisons, they would  
13          protect each other, but I put my worry aside and  
14          went ahead with my report. I was literally in a  
15          state of panic, shaking and sweating profusely like  
16          I am right now as I gave them a description of the  
17          guard and the name of the inmate being abused. I  
18          could not recall Officer Woodson's name at the  
19          time, so I also volunteered to view photos to  
20          confirm his identity. I also made sure to tell  
21          them exactly where the abuse was happening because  
22          I thought it would be a good idea to put up cameras

1 and get solid proof that he was having sexual  
2 relations with an inmate.

3 The lieutenant assured me the case would be  
4 handled properly and that an investigation would be  
5 initiated. They told me that I would be given a  
6 lie detector test to verify that I was telling the  
7 truth.

8 I waited and waited, but the polygraph was  
9 never administered. I was not contacted and I had  
10 no idea what was going on with the investigation.  
11 I started to feel very unsafe because I opened up  
12 about what I knew, and it obviously was not being  
13 taken seriously.

14 About a week after I made my initial  
15 statement, I was once again being transferred, so I  
16 approached Lieutenant Gussiak about the case and I  
17 asked him what was going on. He assured me that a  
18 report had been filed, that the investigation would  
19 continue and that it would follow me wherever I  
20 went. I assumed that this meant that I would be  
21 contacted with an update after my transfer, but  
22 that was not the case.

1           I told a family friend about the abuse because  
2           I thought perhaps the prison officials would take  
3           my report more seriously if someone on the outside  
4           contacted the authorities. This friend wrote a  
5           letter to the warden of the federal prison in  
6           Danbury explaining the situation, but she never  
7           received a response. She then called the warden  
8           and left two messages, which also went unanswered.

9           On December 3rd, 2003, I was sent to  
10          Alderson Federal Prison Camp in West Virginia and  
11          once again I felt relieved that I was leaving an  
12          environment that made me feel unsafe.  
13          Unfortunately, I discovered that there was sexual  
14          abuse going on there as well. For example, an  
15          inmate that was in her early 20s, she told me one  
16          day that she had just "pimped" herself out to a  
17          corrections officer for chewing gum and cookies and  
18          she had tears rolling down her face. I could not  
19          believe how many stories I was hearing of women who  
20          had been sexually abused behind bars.

21                   THE CHAIRMAN: Take your time, Ms.  
22          Ragsdale.

1                   MS. RAGSDALE: All right. It seemed that  
2                   no matter what institution I ended up at, sexual  
3                   assault and/or emotional manipulation was  
4                   occurring. Another woman from the F.D.C. in  
5                   Philadelphia had also been sent to Alderson after  
6                   my transfer and told me that she too had been  
7                   abused by Officer Woodson. When I heard this, I  
8                   could not believe that this corrections officer,  
9                   whom I had reported several months before, was  
10                  continuing to violate other women. Soon, yet  
11                  another woman told me that Officer Woodson had  
12                  raped her as well, and I now knew of three  
13                  different women who had been sexually assaulted by  
14                  the same corrections officer. It appeared to me  
15                  that my report of sexual misconduct had had no  
16                  effect.

17                  Looking back on it, it was terrifying to be in  
18                  a situation where I felt completely unsafe,  
19                  particularly in view of my own history of sexual  
20                  abuse. I had initially thought that because I was  
21                  in the custody of the federal government that I'd  
22                  be well protected. I now realize how common it was

1 for corrections personnel to take advantage of  
2 inmates' vulnerability.

3 While incarcerated at Alderson, and after  
4 learning of the attacks on the other women by  
5 Officer Woodson, the guilt and the fear were  
6 breaking me down, and I kept wishing there was more  
7 I could do. I wanted to feel safe and I wanted the  
8 other women to be safe. Finally, on March 22,  
9 2004, an investigator from the SIS Department,  
10 which is the Investigative Services Division,  
11 requested a signed affidavit from me. I wrote down  
12 everything I knew, including that Officer Woodson  
13 was having sexual relations with female inmates and  
14 the name of one of the victims. This experience  
15 was especially difficult because the investigator  
16 was so frightening and insensitive. He propped his  
17 feet up on his desk, he crossed his arms and he  
18 glared at me. It would have been much easier to  
19 make reports about such a sensitive issue if I  
20 could have spoken to a woman, or if the men that I  
21 was talking to had been more aware of what a  
22 difficult position I was in.

1           Subsequently, additional Internal Affairs  
2           investigators came to Alderson to interview inmates  
3           and investigate problems of sexual abuse within the  
4           facility. I was called in to meet with them and  
5           ended up having a complete emotional breakdown. I  
6           had been under so much pressure and stress since  
7           becoming aware of the sexual assaults at F.D.C.  
8           Philadelphia that I could no longer take it. Up  
9           until this point I have never told anyone outside  
10          of my family, that during eight years of my  
11          childhood I had been sexual abused by my  
12          grandfather. As soon as I walked into the  
13          interview room with the two investigators, I broke  
14          down and started telling them everything I had been  
15          through, as well as about the women who had been  
16          sexually assaulted by Officer Woodson. I had  
17          become a total wreck because I could not understand  
18          why this process was taking so long and why I had  
19          to retell the information from my initial complaint  
20          so many times.

21                 I later found out that Officer Woodson had  
22                 continued to work at the Federal Detention Center

1           in Philadelphia the whole time and that he had gone  
2           on to rape still other women after my initial  
3           report, one of whom was sent to the hospital with  
4           bleeding and hemorrhaging. This completely  
5           devastated me, and I was overcome by the feeling  
6           that I had not done enough. Because of my history  
7           of abuse and the emotional scars that it left, I  
8           felt as if I were to blame and that if only I had  
9           spoken up more and not been so afraid for myself,  
10          these women would have been safe. I never imagined  
11          that sexual abuse was so prevalent in the  
12          correctional institutions or that the investigation  
13          process was so inadequate. I thought that I had  
14          done everything I needed to do by coming forward,  
15          but apparently that was not the case.

16                 Officer Woodson was charged and pleaded guilty  
17                 to felony counts of engaging in sexual acts with  
18                 three women inmates, but he was not prosecuted for  
19                 assaulting the woman who first told me about the  
20                 abuse. He received four months in prison and three  
21                 years of probation, in my view an inexcusably short  
22                 sentence given what I and the women he abused went

1 through.

2 I understand that the federal sentencing  
3 guidelines would allow the sentencing judge to give  
4 Officer Woodson probation only, but fortunately the  
5 judge did not. I still don't understand why the  
6 Federal Bureau of Prisons allowed this employee to  
7 continue working in his position after receiving  
8 detailed reports of misconduct that could have been  
9 verified. I have been greatly saddened and  
10 disappointed by the entire ordeal.

11 I have begun to heal from the sexual abuse I  
12 endured as a child, and am now moving forward with  
13 my life, in part by trying to provide a voice for  
14 women who have been violated behind prison walls.  
15 Along with the three women who were assaulted after  
16 I made my initial report, I now have a lawsuit  
17 pending to seek justice from the federal prison  
18 system and Officer Woodson. I expect to go back to  
19 college in the near future, and most importantly, I  
20 have a beautiful child who I love and protect.

21 Once again, I thank you for letting me speak  
22 with you today, and I hope that what I have said is

1 helpful as you consider ways of improving the  
2 justice system so that women don't feel frightened  
3 or ashamed of coming forward if they become aware  
4 of incidents of sexual assault in prison or  
5 experience the torture and humiliation of abuse  
6 themselves. Thank you.

7 THE CHAIRMAN: Thank you very much, Ms.  
8 Ragsdale. We appreciate the obvious difficulty it  
9 is telling your story, but we appreciate your  
10 coming here today. Thank you.

11 MS. RAGSDALE: Thank you.

12 THE CHAIRMAN: Ms. Brown.

13 MS. BROWN: Good morning. My name is  
14 Necole Anderson Brown. I would first like to thank  
15 the National Prison Rape Elimination Commission for  
16 the opportunity to testify at this hearing. I hope  
17 that by sharing my very painful experience of being  
18 sexually abused in prison, I can assist the  
19 Commission in preventing this from happening to  
20 others. The correctional officer who did this to  
21 me has not been held responsible for what he did  
22 and so I'm here today to seek justice for myself