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

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

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

SURVIVOR TESTIMONY

(Survivor members sworn.)

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

My experience is different because I was not
sexually assaulted while in prison. Instead, I was
a survivor of sexual abuse prior to entering
prison, and I reported to prison staff person for
sexual misconduct. Apparently, I was not taken
seriously because a number of women were assaulted
by this corrections officer long after the report
was made. I hope that my experience dealing with
the repercussions of sexual assault in the federal
detention system helps the National Prison Rape
Elimination Commission to create better policies
for protecting prisoners from sexual misconduct,
ensuring the reports of misconduct are taken
seriously and ensuring the prosecution of staff who
abuse inmates in this way.

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

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

Around the same time, I found out that a
different corrections officer at the F.D.C. was
under investigation for sexual misconduct. I felt extremely unsafe and I did not know what to do about what this woman had told me. I wanted to tell someone, but I knew that inmates who file reports against corrections officials are usually put into isolation. I did not want to be put in the special housing unit, lose my privileges or spend nearly every hour of the day in my cell. Inmates who make reports are often labeled as snitches and risk retaliation by corrections officers or other inmates. I stayed silent and prayed that I would not be victimized.

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

During my orientation, the warden held an assembly where she talked about sexual misconduct and assured the inmates that the institution would take any allegations of abuse very seriously. She went on to state that there had been about five recent substantiated cases of sexual abuse of
inmates. I was frightened when she stated that
this was occurring at the institution, but felt
encouraged that it was being taken seriously.
Although the warden did not explain specifically
how we were to report any problems, I presumed that
telling any of the corrections personnel or their
supervisors would be sufficient to initiate an
investigation.

The abuses by the corrections officer at the
F.D.C. in Philadelphia continued to weigh heavily
on my conscience, but I did not feel safe making a
report. I knew that it was not a good idea to be
seen speaking with corrections officials, as other
inmates might assume that they were being
"snitched" on for something they had done, so I
initially kept quiet. I was assigned to work for
Lieutenant Gussiak cleaning his office. Because I
felt relatively comfortable around him, and I was
able to speak with him in the more private
environment of his office, I began to consider
making a report to him. At the same time, I also
spoke with a therapist at the prison. I told him
what I knew about the sexual abuses at the Federal Detention Center in Philadelphia, and he suggested that I make a formal report.

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

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

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

About a week after I made my initial
statement, I was once again being transferred, so I
approached Lieutenant Gussiak about the case and I
asked him what was going on. He assured me that a
report had been filed, that the investigation would
continue and that it would follow me wherever I
grew. I assumed that this meant that I would be
contacted with an update after my transfer, but
that was not the case.
I told a family friend about the abuse because I thought perhaps the prison officials would take my report more seriously if someone on the outside contacted the authorities. This friend wrote a letter to the warden of the federal prison in Danbury explaining the situation, but she never received a response. She then called the warden and left two messages, which also went unanswered.

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

THE CHAIRMAN: Take your time, Ms. Ragsdale.
MS. RAGSDALE: All right. It seemed that
no matter what institution I ended up at, sexual
assault and/or emotional manipulation was
occurring. Another woman from the F.D.C. in
Philadelphia had also been sent to Alderson after
my transfer and told me that she too had been
abused by Officer Woodson. When I heard this, I
could not believe that this corrections officer,
whom I had reported several months before, was
continuing to violate other women. Soon, yet
another woman told me that Officer Woodson had
raped her as well, and I now knew of three
different women who had been sexually assaulted by
the same corrections officer. It appeared to me
that my report of sexual misconduct had had no
effect.

Looking back on it, it was terrifying to be in
a situation where I felt completely unsafe,
particularly in view of my own history of sexual
abuse. I had initially thought that because I was
in the custody of the federal government that I'd
be well protected. I now realize how common it was
for corrections personnel to take advantage of inmates' vulnerability.

While incarcerated at Alderson, and after learning of the attacks on the other women by Officer Woodson, the guilt and the fear were breaking me down, and I kept wishing there was more I could do. I wanted to feel safe and I wanted the other women to be safe. Finally, on March 22, 2004, an investigator from the SIS Department, which is the Investigative Services Division, requested a signed affidavit from me. I wrote down everything I knew, including that Officer Woodson was having sexual relations with female inmates and the name of one of the victims. This experience was especially difficult because the investigator was so frightening and insensitive. He propped his feet up on his desk, he crossed his arms and he glared at me. It would have been much easier to make reports about such a sensitive issue if I could have spoken to a woman, or if the men that I was talking to had been more aware of what a difficult position I was in.
Subsequently, additional Internal Affairs investigators came to Alderson to interview inmates and investigate problems of sexual abuse within the facility. I was called in to meet with them and ended up having a complete emotional breakdown. I had been under so much pressure and stress since becoming aware of the sexual assaults at F.D.C. Philadelphia that I could no longer take it. Up until this point I have never told anyone outside of my family, that during eight years of my childhood I had been sexual abused by my grandfather. As soon as I walked into the interview room with the two investigators, I broke down and started telling them everything I had been through, as well as about the women who had been sexually assaulted by Officer Woodson. I had become a total wreck because I could not understand why this process was taking so long and why I had to retell the information from my initial complaint so many times.

I later found out that Officer Woodson had continued to work at the Federal Detention Center
in Philadelphia the whole time and that he had gone
on to rape still other women after my initial
report, one of whom was sent to the hospital with
bleeding and hemorrhaging. This completely
devastated me, and I was overcome by the feeling
that I had not done enough. Because of my history
of abuse and the emotional scars that it left, I
felt as if I were to blame and that if only I had
spoken up more and not been so afraid for myself,
these women would have been safe. I never imagined
that sexual abuse was so prevalent in the
correctional institutions or that the investigation
process was so inadequate. I thought that I had
done everything I needed to do by coming forward,
but apparently that was not the case.

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

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

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

Once again, I thank you for letting me speak with you today, and I hope that what I have said is
helpful as you consider ways of improving the justice system so that women don’t feel frightened or ashamed of coming forward if they become aware of incidents of sexual assault in prison or experience the torture and humiliation of abuse themselves. Thank you.

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

MS. RAGSDALE: Thank you.


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