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Saturday, October 18, 2008 10:00 PM EDT

Ex-Waterbury man force-fed in prison State officials prohibit media interviews about his protest

BY JANE MILLS REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

The state Department of Correction is force-feeding William Coleman, a one-time Waterbury resident, but it won't let him accept visits from reporters who want to talk to him about his hunger strike or his life in prison.

Citing "safety and security" concerns, the department said it would not allow a reporter from the Hartford Advocate to visit Coleman, the former coach of the Central Connecticut State University women's soccer team.

Prison spokesman Andrius Banevicius said "officials consider Coleman a narcissist who will only be hardened in his resolve to starve himself if he receives attention from the media."

Coleman, a British citizen who took up residence in Waterbury, is housed in the infirmary of the medium security Osborn Correctional Institution in Somers. He has refused to eat solid food for about a year, and began refusing liquids Sept. 15, according to the American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU is defending his right to engage in a hunger strike, saying force-feeding Coleman violates his constitutional right of free speech and his right to refuse medical care.

Prison medical staff began forcing liquids on Coleman intravenously Sept. 22 after winning a court order in January authorizing their use if it became necessary to maintain Coleman's health.

Coleman is protesting his 2005 conviction in Waterbury Superior Court for sexually assaulting his wife and a justice system he says is easily manipulated by spouses making accusations in the midst of custody and divorce disputes.

Coleman said his ex-wife made up the rape allegations in 2002 as a ploy to gain sole custody of their two sons. The couple was in the process of a divorce at the time; it was finalized after his conviction.

The case against him did not include any forensic evidence; Coleman did not testify and the defense didn't call any other witnesses. In the end, the jury believed the testimony of his ex-wife. The testimony of one witness is enough to convict someone in a rape case.

Coleman's wife said that in the days leading up to the rape he forced her to strip naked and crawl on her hands and knees; eat his saliva off the floor after he spit at her; and ordered her to perform sex acts. If she refused, she said, he hit her and threatened to kill her.

She testified that Coleman had left the family two years earlier and moved to Newport, R.I., but decided he wanted to move back to Connecticut and was incensed to learn that she had found a new boyfriend.

She also testified that she did not go to a hospital after the rape and waited to report the assault to police.

Coleman lost an appeal of the conviction last year and is four years into an eight-year sentence. After his release, he will be required to register as a sex offender and may be deported.

Rep. Chris Caruso, D-Bridgeport, said denying him access to the press may be an issue the legislature should review. "I think you should be able to interview him," he said.

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Caruso said he is not familiar with all the Department of Correction's security procedures but still questioned the denial.

"You can always set up protocols," he said. "Minimally, there is already word out that he is on a hunger strike." The charge he is convicted of is "very serious. I am not taking sides. I just think you should have the right to interview this person. He is pretty emphatic about his innocence," Caruso said.

After contacting officials at the Department of Correction, Rep. Arthur J. O'Neill, R- Southbury, said the department's reasons for denying Coleman visits from journalists are legitimate, although he declined to disclose everything told to him. "Their concerns, which they asked me not to pass on in full to you, did seem to be legitimate," O'Neill said.

"One of their concerns, which is not their most important one, is that this involves a sex offense against someone. Their concern is that he is going to use press interviews to inflict more emotional damage on the victim," O'Neill said.

He said prison officials did agree to expedite the placement of reporters on the list of people Coleman is allowed to telephone. Reporters also can correspond with him by mail. Phone calls are limited to 15 minutes.

Prison officials are not curbing visits to Coleman by clergy or his attorney.

Coleman's attorney, David McGuire, said Coleman is reluctant to talk to reporters by phone because the calls are recorded. Because he is physically weak, it is difficult for Coleman to convey the volume of information that would be generated in a half-hour interview, he said.

Coleman, 48, is 5-feet, 10-inches tall and weighs 135 pounds, down from more than 250 pounds a year ago. He moves about in a wheelchair.

A state court trial is expected in January.

Prison officials use leather straps to hold Coleman to his bed when administering the nutrients, said the ACLU's spokesman, Patrick Doyle.

Medical staff have performed the procedure five or six times since Sept. 22, beginning with only a saline solution and adding electrolytes and potassium to the mix in subsequent feedings. To perform the procedure, Coleman has to be strapped down for up to five hours, with breaks.

Prison officials only comment on the force-feeding is that it is necessary to preserve his health.

In extending the prison's authority to force-feed Coleman, Superior Court Judge James Graham ruled in May that prison officials' concern that other inmates will engage in "copy-cat" hunger strikes if Coleman was allowed to continue, was "entirely credible and persuasive."

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