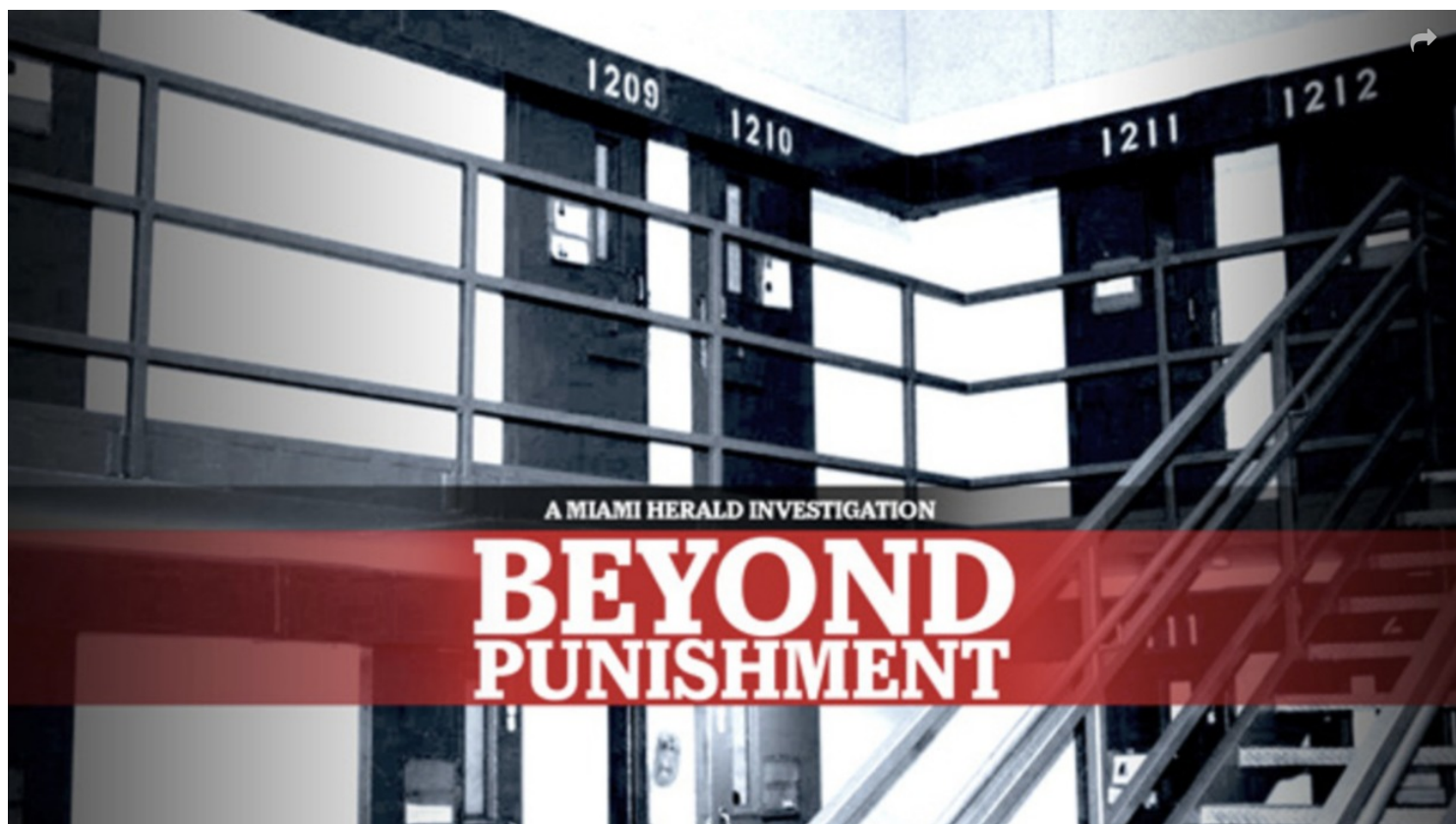




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A Miami Herald I-Team investigation into corruption, sexual abuse and medical neglect at the largest women's prison in the nation, Lowell Correctional. Reporting by Julie K. Brown / [jbrown@miamiherald.com](mailto:jbrown@miamiherald.com). BY EMILY MICHOT

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For years, male officers at the women's work camp at Coleman Federal Correctional Complex sexually harassed and assaulted inmates in what amounted to a "sanctuary" for systemic abuse, a space where they were shielded from any consequences.

If the women complained about being groped, fondled or forced to perform sex acts on officers, the inmates were the ones who were punished.

Fourteen women, ranging in age from 30 to 56 and nearly all first-time offenders,

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The lawsuit seeks compensation and an overhaul of the prison. It was filed this week.



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Coleman officials did not immediately respond to a request from the Miami Herald for comment.

The litigation is the latest manifestation of dysfunction in a federal prison system that seemingly hit bottom when Jeffrey Epstein, perhaps the most high-profile detainee in the nation, was found hanged Aug. 10 in his cell at another BOP facility, the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Manhattan, while officers dozed nearby. The death, which led to the summary removal of the acting director of the prison system, has been termed a suicide. It occurred despite what was described as a previous suicide attempt three weeks earlier.

Although it touches on a second institution in Tallahassee, the lawsuit focuses primarily on Coleman, the largest prison complex in the federal system. Located in Sumter County near Wildwood, it houses more than 6,000 inmates in a series of compounds and camps, including roughly 500 women, the complaint says

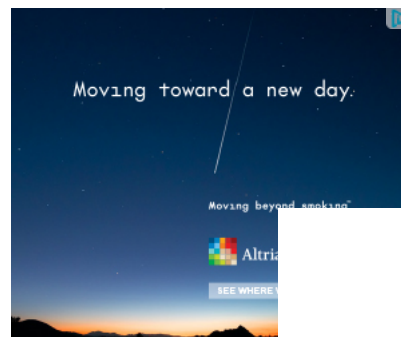
In stark, chilling detail, the lawsuit describes pervasive abuse — how women were coerced and threatened, how they were lured into private offices or remote sheds with no surveillance cameras, or stalked relentlessly by corrections officers until they had no choice but to submit.

The officers — all of whom are identified in the lawsuit, at least by last name — would at times display computer screens showing the women the exact location of their families, a pointed message that their relatives could be targeted if the women didn't cooperate. Some of the women had minor children. In some cases, officers wanted to maintain relationships with the women after they had served their time, according to the lawsuit.

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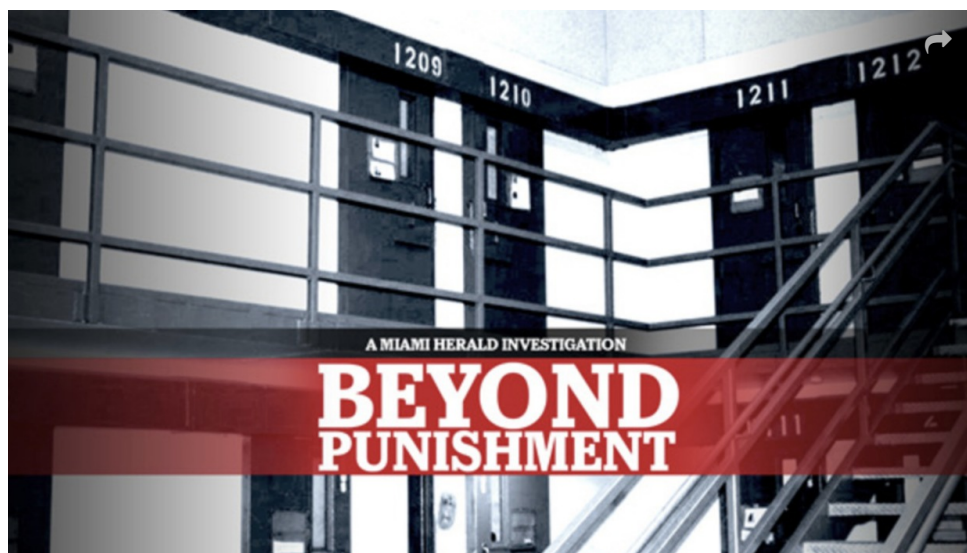
The lawsuit says Coleman employed no fewer than seven officers who took advantage of their authority and access to sexually abuse the women. Some of the officers had been investigated for sexual abuse in the past, with nothing coming of it, the lawsuit alleges.



actions they admitted to — said the women's lawyer, Bryan Busch.

One reason the women didn't come forward until now was a prison policy calling for anyone who complained to be sent to the county jail, according to the lawsuit. Although these transfers were described as a way to maintain the women's safety, they were intended as punishment since a county jail is far more restrictive than a federal work camp, the women say in their lawsuit. Being transferred would cost them the progress they made in their training and work programs.

"The prison certainly did not want this to come out so they suppressed any sort of allegations that were made, and did not conduct complete and full investigations," Busch said.



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After learning that the lawsuit was being drafted, the Miami Herald applied two months ago for permission to visit some of the women at Coleman. Despite a Bureau of Prisons mission statement that encourages visits by the news media "to ensure a better informed public," Coleman said no.

A Coleman public information staffer, Dale Grafton, refused to process the request unless he was told the subject and what purpose the women would serve in the article, which the Miami Herald was unwilling to do, out of concern the women would face reprisals.

When one inmate came to Coleman, her boss at the warehouse told her he could protect her if she gave him what he wanted, according to the lawsuit. What he

penis. She became overcome with anxiety and had trouble breathing. She asked for a job transfer. Even then, the officer would ask her to walk into the woods with him and became enraged when she said no, the lawsuit says.

A woman assigned to maintenance was approached by another inmate in an attempt to recruit her into sex with a supervising officer, she said. He threatened to kick her off the job unless she showed him her breasts. He would leave her gifts and say she had to “pay him back.” One day, he drove her to the edge of the camp, showing her a mattress in the back of a truck. When he tried to undress her, she begged him not to rape her and said she was on her period, according to the lawsuit.



Former Coleman inmate Gina Hernandez.

Another woman on the maintenance job was taken by the officer into a remote trailer. He pulled down her pants and assaulted her, then said “you know they’ve accused me before of rape, but they’re never going to believe you,” the lawsuit says.

Gina Hernandez, a former Coleman inmate, is not part of the lawsuit but says she



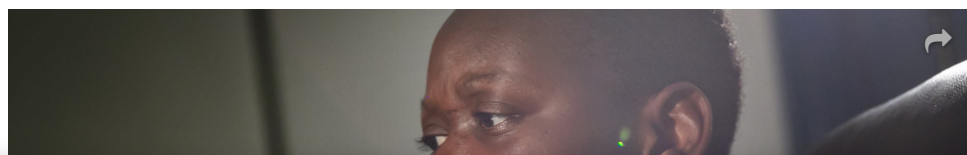
Two years ago, a class-action suit by female employees at Coleman, who said they were discouraged by their bosses from reporting sexual harassment by male inmates, resulted in a \$20 million settlement.

Hernandez has been helping a friend — one of the women in the lawsuit. Her friend said she was cornered by an officer after a visit from her husband in 2014. The officer made another inmate leave the bathroom, then groped the woman, telling her “come on party girl you know what to do,” the lawsuit says.

The incident caused the inmate so much fear that she didn’t have any visitors for four years afterward, out of fear she would be assaulted again.

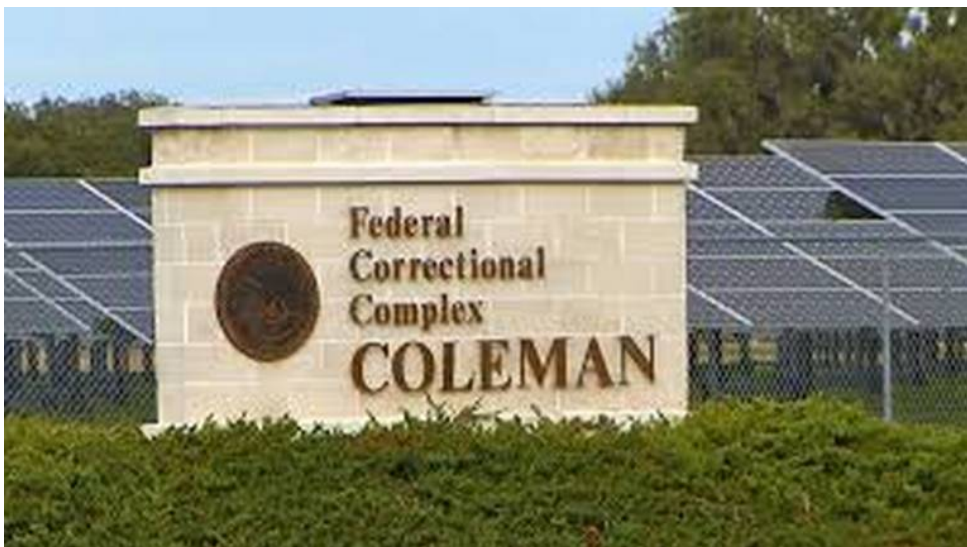
She offered to wear a wire for the FBI, but the agency turned down the chance to investigate, the complaint says.

Coleman has been cited before in a class-action lawsuit by a group of 524 female employees, who received a \$20 million settlement in 2017. The employees said management didn’t protect them from sexual harassment by male inmates and dissuaded the employees from documenting their complaints.



A law called PREA — the Prison Rape Elimination Act — is supposed to prevent the sexual abuse of inmates by staff and fellow inmates. It was signed into law in 2003.

A 2018 PREA report for all Coleman facilities, based in part on a visit, said the facility meets all standards of the law and needed no corrective action, but Busch said the women who had PREA complaints weren't there to be interviewed. They had been relocated to the county jail.



The Coleman Federal Correctional Complex, a Bureau of Prisons facility near Wildwood, Fla., is home to more than 6,000 inmates, roughly 500 of them women.

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