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Guantanamo-linked illness damages agent's faith in FBI

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To FBI Special Agent Theresa A. Foley, it was an exciting chance to serve her country: spend a year at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, interrogating prisoners considered a grave security threat to the United States. Proud of her FBI badge, the Roslindale woman volunteered for the mission.

But after Foley arrived in October 2003, she said, the experience quickly became far different from what she had imagined. Other FBI agents were fishing or diving during work hours, she said, and she was chastised for working too much, missing after-work parties, and not being part of the "FBI Gitmo family."

Those factors, along with the fact that she questioned the ethics and work habits of FBI colleagues, she said, made her something of an outcast at the US naval prison, commonly called Gitmo. As a result, she contends, FBI supervisors at the base were largely indifferent after she contracted a debilitating illness from her rat-infested apartment and was forced to return to her parents' house in Boston.

A 38-year-old counterterrorism agent, Foley used to run 5 miles a day. Now it is difficult to climb stairs. She been unable to work since July. When her sick time ran out early last month, the FBI placed her on unpaid leave.

After battling with the government for months over whether she was injured on the job, Foley said she received a letter this week from the US Department of Labor granting her request for workers' compensation benefits. She said it was only after US Senator Edward M. Kennedy's office intervened at her mother's request that she received anything.

"I feel abandoned by the system, abandoned by them," Foley said in a recent interview at her parents' house, speaking publicly about her case for the first time. "I had a belief in what I was doing, and I feel I was penalized for that."

Two FBI agents who served at Guantanamo with Foley filed statements for her workers' compensation case. The statements, obtained by the Globe, supported Foley's contention that her health rapidly deteriorated after the FBI assigned her to live in a row house infested with rats. Both agents wrote that they saw exterminators pull large rats from Foley's apartment and recounted that she often awoke with flea bites -- her legs and arms so swollen and painful that she could barely walk. One agent wrote that two agents who lived in Foley's apartment had left it filthy, with old food, dirty dishes, and dirty clothing.

Foley said that the unit had barely been cleaned before she moved in, and that the furniture and rugs were soiled with food and rat droppings and the place smelled of garbage. She said she heard rats scurrying in the attic at night.

In the fall of 2003, Foley said, she went to Guantanamo's naval hospital, reporting swelling in her arms and legs, and painful joints. Doctors told her it was probably a reaction to the heat.

FBI officials at the base, she said, did not take her complaints about the rats and her health seriously. She said they waited more than a month to grant her request to move to another housing unit.

By then, she had contracted a bacterial infection called leptospirosis, caused by exposure to rat urine, according to Dr. John Doweiko at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, a specialist on infectious diseases who has been treating Foley for 18 months.

In an interview with the Globe, Doweiko said leptospirosis, which went undiagnosed in Foley by doctors at Guantanamo and a Florida hospital, can be difficult to diagnose. The disease invaded Foley's nervous system, causing pulmonary, muscle, and sinus problems, he said.

The FBI Office of Professional Responsibility is investigating Foley's allegations and is concerned about her health, said Gary M. Bald, FBI executive director of counterterrorism and counterintelligence. "I am confident that they will be able to provide us a full picture of the circumstances and appropriate action will be taken as a result of the . . . inquiry," he said. "I'm very proud of the work that Miss Foley did while she was at Guantanamo Bay as part of a team that I think is doing excellent work on behalf of the United States government."

The Office of Professional Responsibility was scheduled to interview Foley last week, but she postponed it, she said, because she was sick.

Foley, who worked 12-hour shifts and often through the weekends, said she thinks the FBI does not want to acknowledge any responsibility for what happened to her. She said she is convinced the bureau has neglected her because while she was at Guantanamo, she complained about what she perceived as unprofessional conduct by some FBI co-workers on the base.

"You could work as little or as much as you wanted," she said. "I felt left out. Sometimes . . . they'd be going diving and I'd be going to work."

Some of Foley's colleagues backed up her allegations, saying some agents seemed to view their assignment to Guantanamo as an opportunity to swim, fish, and snorkel on government time, and that FBI supervisors allowed it.

"The management did not want to deal with anyone," said a colleague, who like the others spoke on condition of anonymity because they said they feared retaliation from the FBI. "They wanted their time to be smooth sailing. It was . . . almost like vacation time for them."

As for Foley's illness, Bald said, "I'm very concerned about her health situation. . . . I'd love to get her back to work healthy and happy."

US officials said there is no provision under the law to continue to pay federal employees their full pay once their sick time and vacation time has run out. Employees entitled to workers' compensation benefits earn 66 percent of their pay until they return to work.

The FBI has sent more than 500 agents to Guantanamo since the prison camp opened in 2002, but fewer than a dozen are there at any one time. The US Department of Justice is investigating reports by some FBI agents there that detainees have been abused by the military while in custody.

As she wiped back tears, Irene Foley said she has had to take out a home equity loan to help pay her daughter's medical bills that are not covered by her daughter's insurance and the monthly mortgage payments on her daughter's condominium in Virginia.

"My daughter is seriously ill and she's being swept under the carpet," said Irene Foley, 64. "Somebody on that island with the FBI has to be held responsible."

Foley declined to be photographed, saying she feels as though her body has been decimated by her illness.

Foley, who joined the FBI in January 2000 after spending 12 years with the federal Drug Enforcement Administration, acknowledges that she preferred spending her time working. But she said she made friends with some FBI colleagues and a group of soldiers from the Massachusetts National Guard.

Doweiko estimated that Foley's recovery will take a year of physical therapy and perhaps surgery. "I think she will make a full recovery, but it's going to take awhile," he said.

Foley said that although she wants to return to work, she has lost her faith in the agency. "In the beginning I was proud of my accomplishment in becoming an FBI agent," she wrote in the e-mail to the agents association. "But now I have no pride in the badge that comes with it."