

Lawyers denied access

Wanted to see inside Westville

By Joseph N. DiStefano

Staff writer

WESTVILLE—A pair of Chicago civil rights lawyers Monday complained they were illegally barred from entering Indiana's toughest prison, the Maximum Control Center at the Westville Correctional Center, to speak with inmates about what they call "brutal" and illegal conditions.

But Indiana prison spokesman Kevin Moore said the lawyers, former Cook County public defender Mariel Nanasi and her law partner, Erica Thompson, ignored state rules by "just showing up at the door."

The inmates include two of the four who conducted a 37-day hunger strike at the prison last fall. One of the men announced in January he cut his finger off to protest the conditions and tried to mail it to state officials.

The Maximum Control Center opened last spring. It houses 40 inmates in solitary confinement. Their meals are pushed to them through small openings in heavy steel doors. They are allowed out of their cells for up to one hour a day.

Thompson called those conditions, and punitive punishments inmates have complained about, "tantamount to torture."

Moore denied abuses; he said



Mark Davis/staff photographer

Chicago lawyers Mariel Nanasi, left, and Erica Thompson protest refusal of admittance to the Westville Correctional Center Monday.

Maximum Control Center inmates were "predators" who earned harsh but legal treatment by trying to murder guards and other inmates.

Moore said the inmates are allowed visits by family members and their lawyers. Letters written by some of the men and provided by Nanasi show the inmates begged to speak with the lawyers about inhumane conditions and retaliation, but stopped short of requesting they represent them.

Nanasi said Maximum Control Center chief Charles Wright and other prison officials misled her into believing she could visit the prison Monday. Wright referred all ques-

tions to Moore.

Nanasi and Thompson say they have gathered little evidence of specific abuses at the Maximum Control Center — because state officials have denied them permission to enter.

However, the attorneys say they are sure the prison violates the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which forbids "cruel and unusual punishment," because inmate stories of beatings, pain and humiliation parallel those from a similar federal facility in Marion, Ill., which they said has been denounced by international humanitarian organizations.

Thompson said the pair decided to visit the Westville facility after press reports in January that convicted murderer Kataza Taifa had cut off his finger and tried to mail it to state officials in protest.

Nanasi said she and her partner were also inspired by a 37-day protest hunger strike by four inmates last fall. The strike was broken after prison officials received court permission to force-feed the men.

Nanasi and Thompson said they will continue attempts to gather information for a federal lawsuit in hopes of closing the Maximum Control Center.