

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebal](#) | May 26, 2020

The *LA Times* [reported](#) that 74-year-old Chuong Woong Ahn, an immigrant from South Korea held at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Mesa Verde Processing Center in California, died by suicide on May 17. Lawyers had requested Ahn's release and his sister had prepared for him to live with her upon release. Despite Ahn's history of health issues, including lung cancer, diabetes, hypertension, and heart attacks, the requests were denied three times based on a criminal history prior to his detention in the ICE facility. Days before his death, Ahn had tested negative for the coronavirus but was still placed in isolated quarantine for two weeks, despite his history of suicide attempts. Ahn's brother said he had pleaded to be removed from solitary confinement and had begun hunger striking. Priya Patel, a lawyer for Ahn, said, "There were many, many ways it could have been prevented. On a pretty micro level, he shouldn't have been unmonitored in segregation. And also, on a macro level, he should've been released."

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* [reported](#) that Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Secretary John Wetzel announced that the state's prison system will begin gradually lifting the lockdown on May 26. However, Wetzel said they will not be instituting universal testing, and SCI Huntingdon is now facing an outbreak of the virus. Two men died and 158 incarcerated people tested positive last week at the prison. Darryl Johnson, held at SCI Huntingdon, discussed the high anxiety levels. Those returning from the gym [on quarantine] explained that they wait until the very last minute to take those to the hospital who were put on respirators, Johnson said. The vibe is akin to being a pig corralled in a slaughterhouse. Robert Holbrook, formerly incarcerated at Huntingdon and now an organizer at the Abolitionist Law Center, urged the DOC to institute widespread testing and expressed concern that lockdowns will resume when the virus resurges. The entire system is in solitary confinement, and that creates stress, Holbrook said.

The *Santa Fe New Mexican* [reported](#) that New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham announced 31 confirmed positive cases of the coronavirus at the Otero County Prison Facility and 40 confirmed cases at the Otero County Processing Center, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility. Advocate Margaret Brown Vega said that immigrants at the Otero County Processing Center who test positive are being sent to solitary confinement for two weeks. One person told me they felt it was double punishment. They've done nothing wrong, Vega said. In fact, they are sick and they didn't do anything to get sick. They were put in this impossible situation where they couldn't do anything to not get sick. And now they are positive and being thrown into solitary confinement for two weeks. According to the Department of Homeland Security, 965 detained immigrants in the U.S. have tested positive but only 1,804 of the total 27,908 ICE detainees have been tested.

The New Orleans *Advocate* [reported](#) that U.S. District Judge Shelly Dick ruled against a lawsuit filed by incarcerated people in Louisiana, challenging the transfer of sick people to the isolated Camp J unit. The notorious unit at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola had been shuttered in 2018, amid complaints of suicides, solitary confinement, and abusive practices. Since the re-opening of Camp J, 168 incarcerated people have been sent through the unit, including 119 asymptomatic people in step down. Advocates claim the unit is not fit to be used for housing sick people, especially with the lack of proper medical care and monitoring.

*Santa Ynez Valley News* [reported](#) that five people held in the Lompoc Federal Correctional Complex in California filed a class action lawsuit on behalf of the 2,700 people held at the facility against the Bureau of Prison (BOP) Director Michael Carvajal and Lompoc prison warden Louis Milsunic. The lawsuit claims that prison officials' failure to properly test for the coronavirus, provide medical care, and provide sanitary and personal protective equipment has inflicted cruel and unusual punishment and ultimately caused the facility to see the worst outbreak in the nation at one point. On plaintiff, 53-year-old Vincent Reed, who suffers from hypertension, was placed in solitary confinement even before his test results came back. His attorney, Joanna Perales, said, "Mr. Reed was left in [solitary confinement] with no medical treatment. Since March 31, two deaths and over 1,000 cases of COVID-19 have been reported at the facility."

WWNO [reported](#) that Louisiana Representative Mandie Landry has proposed a bill that would prohibit the use of solitary confinement for pregnant women in Louisiana state prisons, except in rare cases. The bill would not affect women held in parish jails. According to reports, Louisiana uses solitary at the highest rate in the country, isolating people at four times the national average. Landry said, "That's particularly problematic in a state like Louisiana where we have the second highest maternal mortality rate in the country, which is a rate that is four times as high for black women. And so when you put a woman who is already at high risk of experiencing complications by

herself without access to anyone who may be able to help her, you increase the risk of blood clots and death. Landry says she is cautiously optimistic the bill will pass, as it has not yet run into any opposition.

The *Norwood News* published an [op-ed](#), written by Anisah Sabur, a formerly incarcerated resident of the Bronx and coordinator for the Coalition for Women Prisoners. Sabur calls for the New York State legislature to reconvene remotely to make decisions affecting state residents in this critically dangerous time. The legislature was originally scheduled to gather April 20 but has since postponed without any stated plan for reconvening. Sabur highlights the importance of passing legislation such as the HALT Solitary Confinement Act, which would ban the use of solitary for longer than fifteen days. Sabur, who has spent time in solitary in a New York State prison, wrote, In ordinary time, solitary confinement is a public health crisis that results in self-mutilation, heart disease, psychosis, and death by suicide. Imagine being in solitary in the midst of this pandemic, more susceptible to the virus because of an immune system weakened by constant stress and deteriorated health, with overwhelming anxiety and no visits with family.

[According](#) to Oregon Public Broadcasting, the Oregon Department of Corrections announced that it will eliminate the states death row at Oregon State Penitentiary, where 27 people are held in solitary confinement. Two others sentenced to death in the state are held at other facilities. While the ACLU of Oregon says the decision does not eliminate the death penalty nor commutes death sentences in the state, the interim director James Carson said, We applaud Oregon for closing our costly and cruel death row and moving to more humane and effective practices. Death row in Oregon is long-term solitary confinement that does not promote rehabilitation or accountability, nor does it make prisons safer.

*The Appeal* published an [article](#) by Joshua Manson covering the most recent federal appeals court hearing on a 2015 settlement, in which California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation agreed to end the use of indefinite solitary confinement across the state. Yet, attorneys told the court in May 12 that many of the men, released from the Security Housing Unit (SHU) at Pelican Bay State Prison as a result of the lawsuit, still face conditions of solitary confinement. Thirty of the men formerly held in the Pelican Bay SHU are now on Walk Alone status, which prohibits them from interacting in group settings and only allows them out of their cell in individual cages. Rachel Meeropol, an attorney with the Center for Constitutional Rights, said, When the class settled this case for a promise that they would be released from solitary confinement, they did not agree to being placed in solitary confinement by another name. The court has yet to rule on the case.

Valerie Kiebal was a contributing writer and editorial and project manager for Solitary Watch, and is now the media director of Straight Ahead, which is building a decarceration movement throughout Pennsylvania. Her work has also appeared in The Root, Truthout, the Chicago Reporter, and Shadowproof.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 26, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

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