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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | April 1, 2019

Democracy Now! [interviewed](#) Albert Woodfox, who spent over 44 years in solitary confinement in Louisiana after being wrongfully convicted of a prison guards murder. Woodfox discussed his recently released memoir *Solitary* and shared memories of his time incarcerated as a member of the Angola 3, along with Herman Wallace and Robert King, who formed the Black Panther Party chapter at Angola prison. Woodfox attributes their decades in solitary to their political activities in prison, the first of which was the creation of an anti-rape squad to protect newly incarcerated boys from becoming victims of the slave-sex trade at Angola. Since his release from prison in 2016, Woodfox says he struggles with the long-term effects of solitary but continues to live out the Angola 3s vow to be the voice of those men and women and children who are hidden behind the walls of prison and in solitary.

CBS [reported](#) that lawsuits have been filed on behalf of the families of two people, 22-year-old Shali Tilson and 40-year-old Jamie Henry, claiming staff negligence contributed to their deaths at the Rockdale County Jail in Georgia last year. The lawsuit states that Tilson, who suffered from schizophrenia, required immediate medical attention but instead was placed in suicide watch or solitary confinement. Despite the policy requiring staff to check on people held in suicide watch every fifteen minutes, Tilson allegedly went two to three days without water and died of dehydration less than two weeks after his arrest. Henry, who had been arrested for a parole violation, died of withdrawal complications, after allegedly being denied proper medical attention.

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* [reported](#) that a group of incarcerated men in Wisconsin, led by Cesar De Leon, plan to go on a hunger strike to pressure Gov. Tony Evers to reduce the use of prolonged solitary confinement and make good on his campaign promise to reform the states solitary confinement practice. Leon, who has been isolated for all but four hours a week for the past five years of his incarceration at the Racine Correctional Institution, wrote in his petition: While in solitary confinement I constantly (lose) a sense of reality. At times, I dont know if Im dreaming or awake so I punch the walls to feel pain, thats really the only feeling that once again makes me feel alive. The Milwaukee Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee reported that eight incarcerated individuals in Wisconsin are participating in the strike.

[According](#) to the *Washington Post*, lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union, Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, and the Santa Fe Dreamers Project wrote a letter to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) last week, calling for an investigation of ICE facilities. The letter claims that twelve gay and transgender immigrants held at the Otero Processing Center in New Mexico have faced abuse, sexual harassment, and solitary confinement. A 21 year old from Honduras said that he stopped reporting the sexual harassment he faced after being threatened with being sent back to solitary confinement for submitting complaints. A letter that Congress members sent to ICE last year said that thirteen percent of the 300 transgender people detained in ICE facilities in 2017 were held in solitary.

Shadowproof [reported](#) that Marty Gottesfeld, a journalist and alleged member of the online hacking group Anonymous, has been transferred to the Communications Management Unit (CMU) in Terre Haute, Indiana. Gottesfeld is serving ten years for conspiracy to intentionally damage a protected computer during a digital sit-in against a hospital. He was transferred to the CMU from the Special Housing Unit (SHU) at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, New York, where he was never provided a reason for his isolation, despite a court order for the warden to do so. CMUs are experimental social isolation units where, according to the Center for Constitutional Rights, Individuals are completely banned from any physical contact with visiting family members and friends and have no meaningful process to challenge their isolation.

Pennsylvania State Representative Morgan B. Cephas wrote an [opinion piece](#) for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* condemning the growing incarceration of women across the country and the negligence of women-specific needs and rights in a system originally designed to incarcerate men. In Mary Baxters case, she was shackled during her 43 hours of labor and placed in solitary confinement after giving birth to her son through C-section. The facilities justification was that they had no housing unit designed for someone in her condition. Cephas calls for support for the Dignity for Incarcerated Women bill, which would ban the use of solitary for pregnant or postpartum women held in the federal system, increase access to feminine hygiene products, and prohibit the shackling of women during pregnancy, among several other reforms.

WBUR [reported](#) that community members and policy makers have called for a review of Massachusetts Section 35 law, which allows addiction patients to be involuntarily transferred to state prisons. The family of Sean Wallace, who committed suicide at the Barnstable County Jail in Massachusetts, believes the law contributed to Wallace taking his own life. Under Section 35, Wallace was transferred to the prison in Bridgewater, where he was denied his addiction medication, harassed by guards, placed in solitary confinement, and as Wallace described it faced torture. He said, I was kicking [my addiction medication] and drugs, I was hallucinating. It was the worse experience of my life. Here I was not having committed any crime in the hole and being harassed by really dangerous people. Wallace was later released but ended up back in jail, where he ultimately took his own life.

The Stranger [reported](#) that the King County Council in Seattle has withheld a \$100,000 allocation to the county because they have failed to effectively end the use of solitary confinement on youth in their detention facilities. While the Department of Adult and Juvenile Detention provided the report required in order for the county to receive the \$100,000, the report revealed that youth continue to face routine solitary confinement. The county passed a law in 2017, after facing several lawsuits against the brutal treatment of youth in the county's facility, agreeing to ban the use of solitary confinement on youth. Until the county eliminates its use of solitary and provides a report detailing the implementation of the ban, the council says it will continue to withhold the funds.

The ACLU of Pennsylvania [reported](#) that, for the third time, they have called for the state to reduce the time that people with psychiatric disabilities are forced to wait in jail before being transferred to a mental health treatment center. Because of the severity of their mental illnesses, their clients should be constitutionally protected from either prosecution or imprisonment, with two federal rulings mandating patients be provided treatment within seven days. Yet, in the state of Pennsylvania, state hospitals remain so full that before the ACLU filed a lawsuit in 2015, people deemed incompetent would sometimes end up spending over two years in jail. Since mental illness can lead to rule violations or behavioral disruptions, people with psychiatric disabilities often end up in solitary, only exacerbating their symptoms. The ACLU last week requested a federal judge to order DHS to obey the seven-day transfer limit.

Shadowproof [reported](#) that Chelsea Manning has been placed in solitary confinement, or administrative segregation allegedly because of her high-profile status, at the Truesdale Adult Detention Center in Virginia. Manning was detained there following her refusal to answer questions about WikiLeaks to a federal grand jury. While the facility claims Manning is not held in conditions of solitary, the support group Chelsea Resists says that Manning has been kept alone in her cell for 22 hours a day, only let out between 1 a.m. and 3 a.m. The group also said that while the facility has been accommodating Chelsea's medical needs, keeping her under these conditions for over fifteen days amounts to torture, possibly in an attempt to coerce her into compliance with the grand jury.

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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