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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | August 1, 2013

Nearly one year ago, J. Heshima Denham, who is being held in solitary confinement at Corcoran State Prisons Security Housing Unit, told Solitary Watch: The reality is there is a significant number of us for whom death holds no real fear, in fact, in some ways as an alternative to another few decades of this it holds some appeal. If it becomes necessary to take up peaceful protest again and its unfortunately looking that way you may be writing a lot more Christian Gomez articles, he wrote, referring to [a man who had died](#) during a hunger strike in the Administrative Segregation Unit at Corcoran in February 2012.

Denham continued: Most here only want to, after so very long, hold their children, kiss their wives, speak to their families, and have access to some meaningful program that will give them some hope of parole, higher education, and marketable job skills. But all of this is indicative of a sick society, of values and mores that have never been seriously and confronted and corrected in the history of U.S. social, political, and economic development.

As the current California prison hunger strike reaches its 25th day, one striker in the Corcoran SHU, [Billy Michael Sell](#), is dead, and others are on increasingly dangerous ground, with no apparent intention to resume eating.

All strikers are to have [received](#) by now written information about advance directives and a Physician Order for Life Sustaining Treatment, and a document informing them You may die, even after you start to eat again, and that Now is the time for you to think about what medical care you want when you are no longer able to talk to health care staff.

Solitary Watch has received confirmation from the Office of the Receiver that hunger strikers at San Quentin did refuse water for one day last week. One San Quentin hunger striker also was rushed to the Emergency Room at an off-site hospital, and returned the same day. Two Pelican Bay hunger strikers were also transported to off-site hospitals for medical attention as well. The Office of the Receiver also responded that it would not consider the use of forced feeding.

Meanwhile, the news has come out that CDCR is allowing [independent monitors to](#) observe the hunger strike, and court documents have been filed by [medical experts](#) blasting healthcare at Corcoran as posing an ongoing serious risk of harm to patients.

As of [Monday](#) there are 561 hunger strikers continuing their protest against long-term solitary confinement and the system that places them there after three weeks. Of these, 385 have been on hunger strike the entire three weeks. The hunger strike and work stoppage that began on July 8th with the participation of approximately 30,000 California prisoners across the state and included out-of-state facilities is the third time California prisoners have launched hunger strikes since June 2011, when thousands of prisoners participated in a mass hunger strike that also lasted approximately three weeks for the same set of demands as the current strike.

The CDCR has been harsh in the response to the present hunger strike. All participants had their cells searched after three days of hunger striking in order to remove any items purchased from the prison canteen, including vitamins, Kool-Aid, and coffee. Individuals found to be drinking Kool-Aid are officially not considered to be on hunger strike, so it is expected that the current figure of 564 is lower than the actual number of hunger strikers. The cell doors of participants have also been blocked by objects, according to CDCR spokesperson Terry Thornton, the Public Information Officer (PIO) at Corcoran State Prison, and multiple reports from Tehachapi State Prison. Hunger strike leaders at Pelican Bay and Corcoran have been removed to other sections, prompting one striker, Michael Dorrough [described](#) the situation as an absolute madhouse.

There have been increasing reports from family members and men in Pelican Bay that the prison has been intentionally lowering the temperatures in order to break the will of the hunger strikers, a claim that Terry Thornton has denied. One family reports that a relative, ten days into the hunger strike, wrote to family members that the air conditioner has been lowered and no medical checks have been given. While CDCR has stated that hunger strikers are being coerced by prison gangs into participating (a claim that has allowed CDCR to make it difficult to obtain institution-specific information), the family also reported that he is participating by his own will and is not being forced by other inmates. He does have a release date within five years and is not a lifer. The conditions and treatment are just that bad that he is willing to be on hunger strike.

Also from Pelican Bay SHU, the son of Dolores Canales, a leader of California Families Against Solitary Confinement, John Martinez, has reported that Im still going strong! and that he was the other day that they were going to isolate the rest of us if we continued to fast. But all that did was encourage me to keep on going, and that threat of being isolated further for hunger strike participation is going to

make matters worse for them [CDCR] because some prisoners started fasting again. And other prisoners that have started eating have already said if they move us, they will be going back on hunger strike.

The five core demands include a demand to end to long-term solitary confinement, a demand for nutritious food, and constructive programming opportunities. The leaders of the strike, dubbed the Short Corridor Collective, is a multiracial group of individuals, said by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to be a group of high level gang members, representing Northern Hispanic, Southern Hispanic, Black, and White prisoners. The four primary representatives of the Short Corridor Collective are incarcerated at the Pelican Bay State Prison Security Housing Unit (SHU), and have spent decades in windowless 812 foot cells largely in solitary confinement. The hunger strike leaders have also filed a federal lawsuit against CDCR for alleged violations of their rights to due process and 8th amendment protections from cruel and unusual punishment. The [lawsuit](#), filed by the Center for Constitutional Rights, has [survived](#) various legal challenges by the State of California.

The CDCR insists that the hunger strike is a mass hunger strike disturbance being directed by prison gangs, and that CDCR has already addressed the primary concerns of the hunger strikers. CDCR, since October 2012, has implemented a case-by-case review process of all 3,000 prisoners in the SHU who had previously placed there for indefinite terms at one of four SHUs across the state for allegedly being prison gang members or associates, as a means for CDCR to control Security Threat Groups or STGs.

Since the review process began, CDCR has reviewed 382 individuals previously identified as members or associates of STGs and immediately released 215 of them to the general population. In other words, CDCR got it wrong more than half of the time in sending people to what one SHU prisoners [describes](#) as nothing more than a torture chamber. These reviews have been halted since the beginning of the hunger strike.

Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watch's first and most prolific intern. Based in Los Angeles, he served as an editorial writer and columnist for the Orange County Register and the Press-Enterprise, and is now the opinion editor for the Southern California News Group.

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 [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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Thank you for keeping this story alive. On my personal blog, I have posted a picture I received from one of the prisoners last week. I am praying for a change in our national awareness.

How can a man be expected to transition back into society as a normal functioning member of society when he has spent decades isolated in solitary.

This government Know exactly whats its doing. They just think You dont know.

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