

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | February 17, 2020

KIRO 7 reported that the family of Damaris Rodriguez, a 43-year-old mother of five who died in the South Correctional Entity Jail in Des Moines, Washington, in 2017, has released a [video](#) documenting her death. When Rodriguez's husband called 911 to request an ambulance for her mental health episode, police took Rodriguez to the jail, where she was put in solitary confinement for four days. The video shows her crawling naked on the floor of her cell, writhing and vomiting, until she finally lies still. According to the family's lawsuit, Rodriguez did not eat for those four days and began hallucinating, was ignored by staff until she died of an easily diagnosable and treatable metabolic condition called ketoacidosis. Attorney Nate Bingham said, Damaris spent the next four days descending into insanity, becoming sicker and sicker and eventually her body shut down and she died. In 2014, after a 50-year-old died at the facility, a nurse who had worked at the jail said, They're not getting the psych treatment they need. There's no psych staff that come in on a regular basis.

The *Detroit Free Press* [reported](#) that 34-year-old Edward Terrell Walton, serving a life sentence at Chippewa Correctional Facility in Michigan, was sent to solitary confinement after writing a letter disclosing harmful conditions at the facility, including what he described as forced labor, overcrowding, black mold in the showers, and discriminatory abuse. Prison administrators punished Walton with solitary for what they called inciting a riot, referencing a line in his letter encouraging people to call the warden and organize a protest. Corrections Department spokesperson Chris Gautz denied that Walton was being punished for speaking out, but said, there is no such thing as a peaceful demonstration [inside prison]. Prisoners are not permitted to engage in organized protest. Walton says that if people refuse to work outside in sweltering heat or freezing conditions or work in the kitchen like a dog for pennies a day serving food, they are locked in their cells and face retaliation.

The ACLU of Nebraska [reported](#) that LB 230, a bill introduced by Senator Patty Pansing Brooks restricting the use of solitary confinement on children in Nebraska juvenile correctional facilities, has been signed into law. Data shows that youth of color face solitary confinement at disproportionate rates in Nebraska. While only four out of every twenty Nebraskan is a person of color, fourteen out of twenty incidents of room confinement involve a youth of color. The ACLU points out that, Juveniles aren't the only ones at risk when it comes to the negative effects of solitary confinement, and as we tackle this harmful practice for children, we need to discuss its impact on adults involved in the system, especially those most harmed by the practice: people with disabilities and mental illness.

[According](#) to the *Lincoln Journal Star*, the Nebraska corrections union, Fraternal Order of Police, prison staff members, and the Department of Corrections Director Scott Frakes came out in opposition to bill LB1208, which would reform the use of solitary confinement for incarcerated adults. The bill, introduced by Senator Tony Vargas, would mandate four to six hours out-of-cell time per day in the restricted housing units, among other changes. Those in opposition claim limiting the use of solitary confinement would compromise the safety of staff. But people who spent time in prison spoke about the damaging effects of isolation, including one man who was driven to attempt to kill himself. A long-time prison staff member testified that Frakes did not share a plan to solve the problems that the bill aims to fix. The working assumption in all of this is nothing is going to change, he said.

[According](#) to the *Kent Reporter*, HB 2277, a bill that prohibits the use of solitary confinement at juvenile facilities in Washington State, passed the House last Thursday. WNSA News Services [covered](#) a hearing last month, discussing HB 2277 and its Senate counterpart SB 6112. The bills would also ban teens from being held in adult facilities for over 24 hours without a court order. James McMahan of the states sheriffs and police association disputed the need for staff to document youth held in adult jails, calling it an exception. But McMahan said, The juvenile will be in solitary confinement the entire time they are in the adult facility because there are no other youth in the facility for them to interact with. A 2012 report found that half of the suicides in juvenile facilities happened in solitary confinement, and in 62 percent of the suicides, the youth had been previously subjected to isolation.

The *Marshall Project* published an [article](#) about staff abuse of the restraint chair at the Wayne County Jail in Missouri, detailed in a lawsuit filed on behalf of 41-year-old Albert Okal, who says he was restrained in the chair for five days straight, force-fed, and verbally harassed with racist slurs. Another man says that after he attempted suicide, staff put him in the chair for 28 days. You ever try to sleep sitting up for a month at a time? he asked. I [now] have to sleep with my head down and read end up, because my back is hurting, and it's the only way I'll be comfortable. Several other people have come forward with a similar experience at the Missouri jail, and lawsuits have described a dangerous, sometimes even fatal, use of the restraint chair in jails and prisons across the country. Thirty-six known

deathshave been reported to involve the use of the restraint chair in the U.S. since the late 1990s.

Social Media Today [reported](#) on the launch by YouTube and Google of a virtual reality experience called Project Witness, bringing viewers into the simulation of an incarcerated child's world in solitary confinement in an adult prison. The article notes that Project Witness attempts to reach people through a unique, immersive method of storytelling in a way that can connect people more closely with the sensation of living in isolation.

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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