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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/05/24/virginia-prisoners-in-solitary-confinement-launch-hunger-strike/>

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | May 24, 2012

The [Washington Post](#) reported yesterday that four dozen inmates at Virginia's Red Onion State Prison have launched a hunger strike in protest of their long-term solitary confinement.

In a letter to Solitary Watch written before the hunger strike, one Red Onion inmate held in isolation reported that the prison was absolutely primitive; they have me next to an inmate that throws poop on the tier, rubs it all over regularly; the pod has several like that; constant yelling, banging. Another inmate at Red Onion wrote that the conditions of the isolation unit would make you truly wonder what the hell is going on in the minds of people who run these institutions.

Red Onion was the subject of a 1999 Human Rights Watch [report](#), in which it was blasted for failing to embrace basic tenets of sound correctional practice and laws protecting inmates from abusive, degrading or cruel treatment.

The prison has received [increasing scrutiny](#) in recent months; of its over 500 inmates in solitary, many are known to have been diagnosed mentally ill. Red Onion inmates are isolated for an average of 2.7 years. The conditions at Red Onion State Prison prompted [some legislators](#) to ask for a federal investigation of the use of solitary confinement at the prison. The scrutiny has prompted [reviews](#) of policies, though the hunger strikers have demanded more sweeping reforms.

The inmates have issued [ten demands](#). Among them is a demand for an end to torture in the form of indefinite segregation through the implementation of a fair and transparent process whereby prisoners can earn the right to be released from segregation.

According to Virginia Department of Corrections spokesman [Larry Taylor](#),

I am unable to confirm a hunger strike at Red Onion, said spokesman Larry Taylor. I am aware of a press conference this morning that they are beginning a hunger strike. Our response is that Red Onion has always operated constitutionally and has protected the 8th Amendment rights of offenders, and it has been nationally accredited by the American Correctional Association.

The hunger strike to protest conditions at Red Onion State Prison, including prolonged solitary confinement, indicates a need for increased transparency of the Virginia Department of Corrections recently proposed changes to solitary confinement policies.

Currently, nearly 500 inmates at Red Onion spend 23 hours a day in a cell by themselves, with limited access to a caged pen for solitary exercise. Some Virginia prisoners, including those with mental illnesses, have been kept in isolation for years.

Our faith traditions recognize the inherent dignity of every human being, a quality that should not disappear behind prison gates. Prolonged isolation violates individuals God-given dignity by destroying prisoners' minds and the opportunity for genuine rehabilitation.

Many studies have documented the detrimental psychological effects of long-term segregation, such as hallucinations, illusions, perceptual distortions, and hyperresponsivity to external stimuli.

More often than not, prisoners held in segregation return to society as less functional human beings, and studies indicate that isolation increases prisoners' risk of recidivism. Housing prisoners in solitary confinement also costs the Commonwealth significantly more than housing prisoners in general prison population.

In light of the high cost of solitary confinement and its diminishing returns, states around the country are reducing their use of segregation and finding that there are safe alternatives. Both Mississippi and Maine have drastically reduced the use of solitary confinement and as a result, have not only saved millions of taxpayer dollars, but actually experienced a decline in violent incidents within their prisons.

NRCAT applauds Virginia's Department of Corrections for its internal plans to reform the use of isolation at Red Onion, including appointing a team of experts to examine each prisoner and design personalized case plans, and adding additional levels of review before inmates are placed in solitary confinement. However, we remain convinced that independent review using expert data analysis

methodology is essential to successfully implement alternatives to solitary confinement. Publicly announcing such an independent review would also demonstrate the Department's good faith to reform its isolation policies. We urge the Department to provide transparent reporting of its plans and progress.

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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that they stand strong in the face of injustices they will face may they be as strong as the 300 Spartans fight to the end may there be light in the darkness of justice

one has to ask this question: how good is a reference to the accreditation of the American Corrections Association when the ACA demands a fixed up front fee for the audit, then works with the facility to coordinate the audit and allows "makeups" to be made to allow for discrepancies to be corrected on the spot to ensure a passing grade. Oh yeah, a few bucks in your pocket will get you accredited too. Is this like an extended warranty on a car?? oh wait we are dealing with people here, not cars.. foolish thing to say in a press release when we all know they are dancing around the question asked.

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P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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