

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/addressing-the-overuse-of-segregation-in-u-s-prisons-and-jails/oprah-spotlights-solitary-confinement-as-movement-to-rethink-its-use-picks-up-steam>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Why does an inmate deserve hope?

Sitting in a now-empty pod of Secure Housing Unit (SHU) cells perhaps better known as solitary confinement cells inside California's infamous Pelican Bay Prison, Oprah Winfrey asks this question of California Corrections Secretary Scott Kernan. The interview was part of Winfrey's [60 Minutes report](#) on solitary confinement that aired nationwide yesterday.

The pod Winfrey and Kernan are sitting in is empty because of a settlement reached between California prisoners and the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation that limited who can be held in solitary confinement.

The department is now repurposing these pods into open minimum-security units a type of creative reform that Vera is also working towards through the [Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative \(SAS Initiative\)](#).

Winfrey's *60 Minutes* report highlights the growing movement nationwide to reduce solitary confinement referred to by corrections agencies as restrictive housing or segregation and also provides prominent exposure to shifting perspectives on the impacts of incarceration on millions of people who will someday return to our country's communities.

Vera's work on solitary confinement since 2010, through partnerships with 16 state and local correctional agencies around the country, is leading this movement to develop and implement strategies that no longer rely on putting people in the most restrictive of settings.

Two members of the [SAS Initiative Advisory Council](#), Dr. Craig Haney and Danny Murillo, are prominently featured in Winfrey's report. Both Murillo and Haney speak to the trauma of long-term restrictive housing, and both also have intimate knowledge of the impacts of solitary confinement at Pelican Bay. Dr. Haney as a social psychologist, and Danny Murillo through his personal experiences.

On his experience in Pelican Bay's secure housing unit, Murillo says, It was created to break me, [mentally, physically, and spiritually](#).

How can America create a system that doesn't do those things? To do so, we must answer Winfrey's initial question: *Why do people who are incarcerated deserve hope?* Across the country, in red states and blue, we've seen a growing momentum to answer with compassion.

California Corrections Secretary Scott Kernan answered Winfrey, stating unequivocally, They're people. They're all coming out to be our neighbors. Why wouldn't we spend the resources and create an environment where when they come out, they're better people than when they got here? I just think it makes all the sense in the world. It's common sense.

We agree. Creating an environment that allows people the chance to be better is exactly what our partner agencies are endeavoring to do. It's vital work that ensures people and their communities have the opportunity to thrive.

PUBLICATION

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