

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/01/05/solitary-confinement-for-transgender-inmate-in-virginia/>

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close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | January 5, 2010

The *Washington Examiner* has been reporting on the fate of a transgender prisoner who has been languishing in solitary confinement in a Virginia jail because, according to officials, they didn't know what else to do with her. The [latest news](#) is that she has been moved to the jail's hospital while awaiting transfer to a federal prison that is said to provide transgender treatment and counseling.

Officials at Central Virginia Regional Jail said they had initially placed Maria Benita Santamaria in solitary confinement because they feared she would be raped by male inmates. Her attorney, Cathy Alterman, said they moved the 35-year-old to the medical wing late Wednesday night after U.S. District Court Judge T.S. Ellis ordered them to do so.

Alterman said Santamaria was born a male, but lives life as a woman and has a feminine appearance. She has been undergoing hormone treatment in preparation for a sex change operation for the past two years. Since she's been in prison, however, Alterman says Santamaria has not received the hormones and has started to grow facial hair.

During her stay in solitary confinement, Santamaria was treated no different than inmates on punitive lockdown, Deputy Superintendent Susan Fletcher said. She was allowed out of her cell for one hour a day and allowed to shower every three days.

Alterman said jail guards referred to Santamaria as it and the conditions have pushed her to consider suicide. Despite the threat of being raped by male inmates, Santamaria has repeatedly asked to be placed in general population.

This is hardly a unique case. Unless they have had sex-reassignment surgery, male-to-female transgender individuals are considered male, and placed in men's jails and prisons, where they inevitably become victims of rape. But the only alternative available at most prisons is administrative segregation, which is supposed to be reserved for punishment. So transgender prisoners end up getting sent to the hole simply for being who they are.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the *Village Voice* and *Mother Jones*, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for *The New Republic* and *Ramparts*, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in *The Guardian*, *The Nation*, and *Mother Jones*, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets [@solitarywatch](#).

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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One hour of sunshine a day and a shower every 3 days sounds like punishment to me.

Lets see here. What do you do with a transexual in jail? Put him in a block with other male inmates? I dont think so, he will be in a fight within the first day. This is a jail, not a federal prison. If you think him/her will get raped, youve seen one to many episodes of Oz. Put him in a female block? Are you kidding, he still has a penis. The only solution is for him to be housed in a segregated enviroment. By the way administrative seg is not punishment. Punitive seg is punishment. Admin seg you get rec/showers everyday

It is time for society and the law to face these issues head on and begin to write legislation to address these more and more common circumstances.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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