

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](#) | December 21, 2020

The New Orleans *Lens* [reported](#) that the non-profit Promise of Justice Initiative (PJI) released a [report](#), claiming that prison administrators and staff responded inadequately to the coronavirus pandemic, causing unnecessary death and suffering. The report found, Principally, correctional officials [in Louisiana] responded to COVID- 19 orexposure to the virus by placingpeople in solitary confinementor putting portions of a facilityon lockdown Solitary confinement likely deterred people from reporting symptoms and led to increased viral spread. Additionallysolitary confinement [is] a form of torturemaking it particularly cruel to impose upon people experiencing or exposed to a life- threatening illness. The report also criticized prison administrators reopening of Camp J, a unit at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola that had previously been shuttered but then used to house sick people.

The *Advocate* [reported](#) that 61-year-old Marcus Morris died hours after a CorrectHealth nurse found that he was not in need of urgent medical care, leaving Morris in solitary confinement at the East Baton Rouge Parish Prison. Morris died on December 6. His cause of death is still under investigation, though he had a history of mental illness, seizure disorder, and other serious medical problems. Earlier this year, city officials announced that they would solicit proposals for a new health care contract at the jail, acknowledging concerns about CorrectHealth, including the high rate of death.

[According to Crosscut](#), incarcerated people in Washington State have reported being punished for contracting the coronavirus. Eight people held at the Bishop Lewis Work Release Facility in Seattle were sent back to prison and put in solitary after testing positive for the virus. Milo Burshaine, one of the eight, said, Essentially we caught COVID because of the work release and now youre going to punish us because we have it. Families of incarcerated people had already reported this type of retaliation against six men held at a different work release facility called Reynolds over the summer. The Reynolds six, as the men were called, were sent back to prison after contracting the virus, and their families believed they were singled out because they are Black, Muslim, or Indigenous. The *Spokesman Review* [covered](#) the conditions in solitary, where one woman reported her loved one was denied a shower for ten days. Last month, the third incarcerated person in the Washington Department of Corrections died of COVID-19.

A new watchdog group in New Mexico has been founded to track and challenge conditions in the states prisons and jails, including the use of solitary confinement. The [New Mexico Prison & Jail Project](#) is led by ACLU attorney Steven Robert Allen, who worked on legislation to limit solitary in the state, and advisors includecivil rights attorney Matthew Coyte, who has won numerous lawsuits against local jails over their use of solitary and was the subject of [a feature inRolling Stone](#) written by Solitary Watch staff writer Katie Rose Quandt. The new group has [already filed at least ten lawsuits](#) against the NM Corrections Department for failing to supply public records in compliance with state law.

BuzzFeed News [obtained the draft of a report](#) from the Department of Homeland Security Inspector General, regarding the treatment of immigrants at Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities. Specifically, the report referred to the findings of a February inspection at the Imperial Regional Detention Facility (IRDF), where eleven immigrants had been isolated in solitary confinement for over 60 days and two other immigrants isolated for over 300 days. Inspectors said there was no documented evaluation process to determine their continued placement in solitary and people in solitary were not allowed the required hour of recreation time per day. Additionally, the inspectors found expired and moldy food being stored. IRDF operates out of Calexico, California, and is run by the Management and Training Corporation.

The *Carolina Public Press* [reported](#) that the North Carolina Department of Public Safety (DPS) has been plagued with short staffing and inhumane conditions long before COVID-19 hit, but the pandemic has further heightened the risk to incarcerated peoples lives. While the NC Institution for Women posted a memo on the wall saying, Quarantine in segregation is not for punishment. It is for your own health, Lisa Phelps said, It was not for punishment, but it felt like it. Phelps said she was locked in her cell for 23 hours a day and only allowed out three times a week, when she could walk three steps sideways and four steps forward in another cage. An attorney with the NC Prisoner Legal Services said using solitary cells for quarantine creates distrust between staff and incarcerated people. Thats the system that DPS has set up where people who might be sick arent going to want to report it, he said.

Courthouse News Service [reported](#) that the attorney for Fulton County Sheriff Theodore Jackson in Georgia asked the 11th Circuit court

to reverse a 2019 order ending the use of solitary confinement for mentally ill women in the jail. Devon Orland, an attorney for the Georgia Advocacy Office, said that women with serious mental illness are held in repulsive and shameful conditions for weeks and months on end. The U.S. Circuit Judge even called the alleged conditions pretty horrific. Orland said, The cells were covered in bodily fluids, rust and mold. In these conditions, they deteriorated, leaving them incoherent, screaming unintelligibly, laying catatonic, banging their heads against walls, and repeatedly attempting suicide. The circuit court panel has not yet announced when it will reach a decision.

The *New York Times* [reported](#) that the American Institute of Architects (A.I.A.) approved a new code of ethics banning members from designing spaces intended for torture or death, including solitary confinement. Architect Raphael Sperry had been calling for the A.I.A. to take this stance for years, but the institute openly rejected these calls claiming that it did not want to censure designers. Now that the A.I.A. has changed its position, Sperry wrote, Architecture has historically been a white, male dominated profession that has participated in systems of oppression and injustice including segregation and mass incarceration. This code change is a sign that things can change and that they are changing.

Spectrum News [reported](#) that the City Council held its first hearing on the bill to ban the use of solitary confinement in New York City jails, almost six months after Mayor Bill de Blasio announced he would form a working group to develop a plan to implement the ban on solitary. The announcement came a year after the death of transgender woman Layleen Polanco in a solitary cell at Rikers Island. Melania Brown, the sister of Polanco, said, Solitary confinement to me is just a fancy name for the death penalty. That's how I view it. That's how I see it. My family and I now have to live with a painful life sentence. But when pressed, Correction Commissioner Cynthia Brann said she did not believe that punitive segregation is torture. And the president of the Correction Officers Benevolent Association, Benny Boscio, pleaded with the council to reject the ban.

The *American Prospect* published an [article](#) about Photo Requests from Solitary (PRFS), a project sponsored by Solitary Watch that connects people in solitary with volunteer artists on the outside to fulfill requests from incarcerated participants isolated in prisons across the country. The request communicates what the person in solitary most wants to see anything at all, real or imagined. One of the PRFS exhibits lives at the Eastern State Penitentiary, the first site of solitary confinement in the U.S. Now, the prison has been turned into a museum. Laurie Jo Reynolds, the founder of the project, explained that when people view the exhibit, A paradigm shift happens in people's brains: Oh, right, these are human beings just like me, and they see things, they have memories, they long for things.

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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