

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](#) | September 29, 2020

The national Unlock the Box campaign, in partnership with over 100 medical experts, human rights organizations, and faith groups, sent a [letter](#) to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), calling for clear guidelines to eliminate the use of solitary confinement as a response to COVID-19 in jails and prisons across the country. Unlock the Box Campaign Strategist Jessica Sandoval said, These tactics [of solitary confinement and system-wide lockdowns] are proven to be dangerous and ineffective, and with the number of cases quickly rising, we are on the verge of a deeper crisis of unprecedented size and scale. Over 1,000 incarcerated people have already been reported dead from the virus. The letter laid out five specific asks for the CDC to address immediately in order to avoid further spread of the disease, torture, and death.

[According](#) to *Just the News*, the House Homeland Security Committee released the [majority staff report](#) *ICE Detention Facilities: Failing to Meet Basic Standards of Care* after investigating eight Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities, finding excessive use of solitary confinement. The report cited evidence that ICEs facilities improperly used segregation as retaliation and in a manner that failed to meet ICEs standards. Specifically at the Otero County Processing Center in New Mexico, immigrants reported placement in solitary for engaging in permissible acts that detention staff consider disruptive, like submitting too many medical requests. At least three immigrants have died by suicide in solitary confinement in ICE custody. The House Committee called for the Government Accountability Office to further investigate the use of segregation.

In another Congressional investigation into ICE facilities, the House Oversight and Reform Committee found a pattern of inadequate medical care at privately-run ICE detention centers, [according](#) to *AZ Central*. In one case, several flagrant violations emerged in the death of 47-year-old Vietnamese immigrant Huy Chi Tran in solitary confinement in June 2018 at Eloy Detention Center, an ICE facility in Arizona operated by private prison company CoreCivic. The [committees majority staff report](#), entitled *The Trump Administrations Mistreatment of Detained Immigrants: Deaths and Deficient Medical Care by For-Profit Detention Contractors*, determined Trans death to be part of a widespread failure to provide necessary medical care to detainees with serious and chronic medical conditions. The Committee condemned the Trump administration for continuing to advance lucrative contracts with companies providing abysmal medical care to detained immigrants. At least 49 people have died in ICE custody since 2017.

The DCist [reported](#) that Disability Rights DC (DRDC) released a [report](#) entitled, *Abuse Unabated: Restraint and Seclusion at St. Elizabeths Hospital*, which found that the facility has steadily increased its use of restraints and seclusion. Based on incident reports, in 2012, St. Elizabeths used restraints five times and seclusion 30 times. But in 2018, the numbers spiked to 782 uses of restraints and 291 for seclusion. While the D.C. Department of Behavioral Health claimed the measures are used as a last resort, the DRDC reviewed footage of restraints and seclusion used in cases where the patient did not resist. Ultimately, the report found widely used, abusive restraints and seclusions are far from respectful or dignified treatment. These extreme measures have no therapeutic value, causing suffering, may trigger severe pain from past trauma, and frequently result in emotional and physical harm, and even death. Fourteen people have died from the virus at the facility, which currently faces a lawsuit for mishandling the pandemic.

The *Atlanta-Journal Constitution* [reported](#) that invasive gynecological procedures were forced upon women held at the Irwin County Detention Center in Georgia under the threat of punishment with solitary confinement. A nurse who previously worked at the facility exposed allegations about a male gynecologist, claiming that he had performed several surgeries on detained women without their consent that left them unable to bear children. Congress members subsequently toured the Irwin Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center, and U.S. Representative Adriano Espaillat called the situation a horror story. He said, This facility should be shut down. The deputy secretary of the Department of Homeland Security denied the allegations.

The *San Francisco Bayview* published a [firsthand account](#) from Eric Allen, a 26-year-old held at the Sierra Conservation Center in California, in which he described his experience in solitary confinement during the pandemic. Allen spent 28 straight days in quarantine, which equates to solitary confinement at the Jamestown prison. In addition to the torturous psychological effects, Allen emphasized how damaging it has been for him to be denied basic privileges, a punitive practice that distinguishes solitary from medical isolation. In solitary, Allen said he has been denied access to phone calls, visitation, commissary, and basic hygiene items. Sitting here, Im angry, Allen wrote, feeling powerless in despair, stressed and depressed. Im terrified I will for sure die in this prison cell alone. While Allen said

inadequate medical care is not new in California prisons, COVID-19 has revealed the dire need to address the health care crisis in prisons.

The Justice Arts Coalition is hosting an online workshop Tuesday, September 29, at 5 p.m. with Kenneth Reams, an artist, poet, writer, and founder of the organization Who Decides, Inc. who has spent the past 27 years in solitary confinement after being sentenced to death in Arkansas. Reams was accused of being an unarmed accomplice in a robbery, but insisting on his innocence, Reams refused to accept a plea bargain and remains in solitary confinement on death row. The workshop will also feature Judith Elane, an attorney and member of the Arkansas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. The conversation will be centered on the intersection of law, activism, and the transformative powers of the arts. Information on how to register can be found [here](#).

The [Pulitzer Center](#) is hosting a virtual performance of *The Box*, a play about solitary confinement, written by solitary survivor Sarah Shourd in collaboration with other solitary survivors. Shourd, who has been a contributor to Solitary Watch, based the play on her experience in solitary confinement as well as a three-year investigation into solitary, and challenges the viewer to re-examine conventional understandings of punishment. The play reveals the tragic and sometimes painfully comic and absurd realities that dictate life inside the box. The play will be performed on October 1 at 7 pm EST and October 3 at 4 pm and 7 pm EST. Attendance is free, but registration is required [here](#).

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 [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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