

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2014/03/14/funding-approved-for-activation-of-adxusp-thomson-new-federal-supermax/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Lisa Dawson](#) | March 14, 2014

Even as it touts new initiatives to reduce the number of people it holds in solitary confinement, the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) continues to quietly make headway on the activation of Thomson Correctional Center in northwestern Illinois. If all proceeds as planned, Thomson will substantially *increase* the federal governments capacity to hold individuals in extreme isolation a fact that no one, these days, seems to want to talk about.

Yesterday, Illinois Senator Dick Durbin and local Congress member Cheri Bustos [announced that](#) the BOP has committed \$53.7 million in funding for fiscal year 2014 to retrofit and open Thomson. Of that funding, \$10 million will be used for renovation, and \$43.7 million will be used for equipment and staffing. This is the news weve been waiting for, Durbin said in a [press release](#). Its a sure sign that work will begin soon in Thomson and confirms, without a doubt, that the Obama Administration remains firmly committed to opening and operating Thomson prison.

Thomson, the unoccupied prison that the federal government [bought](#) from the state of Illinois in 2012, was built between 1999 and 2001 but never opened. Dubbed early on [Gitmo North](#), the facility was originally viewed by the Obama Administration as a [possible future home](#) for scores of terrorism suspects held by the U.S. at Guantanamo Bay military detention camp in Cuba. The press release put out yesterday by Durbin and Bustos called Thomson a state-of-the-art, maximum-security prison, but made no mention that it was slated to become, at least in part, a supermax.

As Solitary Watch [reported](#) last year, Thomson is slated to be an Administrative Maximum U.S. Penitentiary (ADX/USP). Administrative Maximum is a security classification currently held only by [ADX Florence](#) in Colorado, where some 400 people live in 23-hour-a-day solitary confinement, in isolation so extreme that it has been challenged in [series of lawsuits](#) and widely criticized as torture. The joint classification of Thomson as ADX/USP means that a portion of the new prison will also have a Maximum Security classification, which will include an SMU, or Special Management Unit, where individuals are also held in 23-hour lockdown, often with two or three people to a cell.

When asked by Solitary Watch last week for details on the prisons design (specifically how many of each ADX and USP cells Thomson will contain) and funding, BOP spokesperson Chris Burke responded in an email, stating only that:

Thomson will be a high security prison holding inmates with various security needs. It has 1,600 cells and will help to alleviate crowding. The BOP is working with the Department of Justice and the OMB to develop the FY 2014 Spending Plan. Once complete, the Spending Plan will be submitted to Congress for approval. Until Congress provides the final approval, we will not be able to share the details of the plan.

When asked about the prison last year, Burke was more transparent about Thomsons security levels, stating that Thomson will be a high security prison holding inmates with various security needs, including SMU and ADX type inmates.

Solitary Watch also asked why the BOP requires new supermax cells despite plans to reduce the number of people in solitary, and details on what measures were being taken to do so. Burke said that high security facilities are currently 51% over rated capacity.

Burke also stated that for the past almost two years, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) has focused on carefully reviewing, assessing, and refining our approach to restrictive housing to ensure that inmates are there for the right reasons and for an appropriate duration. He listed a number of initiatives designed to reduce restricted housing, including new tracking systems, a secure mental health step down unit, a reintegration unit, and a new gang-free institution.

Backing the opening of ADX/USP Thomson is the same Sen. Dick Durbin (D, IL) who has built a reputation challenging the use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons. In June 2012 he chaired the [first-ever Congressional hearing](#) on solitary confinement. Yet that same year, Durbin played a key role in the state of Illinois [sale of Thomson](#) to the federal government.

When asked by Solitary Watch about Durbins support of a new federal supermax, spokesperson Max Gleischman did not deny that Thomson would include ADX cells. He did not comment on the apparent contradiction in Durbins position, except to say that no one

would be housed in segregation unnecessarily. In an email, Gleischman said:

Senator Durbin opposes the unnecessary use of solitary confinement in federal prisons, jails and detention centers and has been working to highlight consequences the misuse of solitary has on prisoner health and prison safety for years. Thomson prison will be a federal maximum security prison and will help elevate massive overcrowding within the Federal prison system. Senator Durbin will continue his work to ensure that all prisoners, whether in Thomson or elsewhere in the Federal system, are treated humanely and that no one is housed in segregation unnecessarily.

Durbin also included a brief statement about his position on Thomson in his opening remarks at the Senate Judiciary Subcommittees second [hearing on solitary confinement](#) on February 25, 2014. Durbin began by calling solitary confinement a human rights crisis we cant ignore. He also praised BOP director Charles Samuels for his efforts to reduce solitary confinement. Nonetheless, Durbin said, the overcrowding crisis in federal prisons was one reason Im working to open Thomson Correctional Center as a federal prison in my state. I look forward to working with the Bureau of Prisons to ensure that Thomson helps to alleviate overcrowding and that all prisoners held there are treated appropriately and humanely.

Two days after the hearing, Durbin was urging President Barack Obama to fund the opening of Thomson for fiscal year 2015. Durbin was joined by his protg U.S. Rep. Cheri Bustos (D, IL-17), who represents the district that holds Thomson prison. In [a letter](#) dated February 27, 2014, the pair writes:

We write today to respectfully request that you prioritize the activation of Illinois Thomson Correctional Center in your FY2015 budget proposal which is expected to be released on March 4, 2014. According to the Bureau of Prisons (BOP), the full activation of this long delayed facility should take two fiscal years (FY 2014 and FY 2015) and include about \$25 million for construction and other related facility upgrades and approximately \$170 million for staffing and equipment. The first installment of those funds should now be available as a result of the Fiscal Year 2014 Consolidated Appropriations Act which was passed by Congress and signed into law by the President in January.

On Tuesday, March 4, the budget request of the U.S. government for FY 2015 was released, proposing \$8.5 billion for prisons and detention to maintain and secure federal prisons and detention facilities. The [budget request fact sheet](#) is vague, offering few specifics on how the money will be spent. It does mention funds for bringing online newly constructed or acquired prisons but avoids naming them.

The FY 2015 Budget requests a total of \$8.5 billion for federal prisons and detention. Of this amount, \$6.9 billion is requested for the BOP and \$1.6 billion is for the Federal Prisoner Detention (FPD) appropriation. In addition, the FY 2015 Budget proposes to rescind \$122.0 million in prior year detention balances, which are available because the FY 2013 detention population was lower than projected. The FY 2015 Budgets Opportunity, Growth, and Security Initiative also includes resources for the BOP for infrastructure and personnel to continue the process of bringing on-line newly completed or acquired prisons and thereby reduce prison overcrowding.

This breakdown is particularly obscure in comparison to the details contained in the [FY 2014 budget request](#), which specifically references ADX/USP Thomson:

ADX USP Thomson, IL: \$58.7 million and 1,158 positions (749 correctional officers) \$15 million to renovate the Thomson Correctional Center for high security federal prison use. \$43.7 million to begin activating ADX USP Thomson (2,100 beds) as an administrative-maximum high security facility. ADX USP Thomson is expected to reduce crowding in high security facilities from 59 percent by 43 percent by the end of FY 2015. There are no current services for this initiative.

Despite the new-found reluctance to provide details on Thomsons security level, there is nothing to indicate that the BOPs plans to open additional supermax cells at the new prison have changed. Nor does the BOP appear to have any doubts that it will obtain the required funding. When asked if there is a scheduled opening date for the Thomson, spokesperson Chris Burke said: When funding is provided, it will take about 2 to 3 years to ramp up to full activation of the facility.

Lisa Dawson served as an assistant editor, social media manager, and contributor at Solitary Watch. She continues to support prisoners and their family members who need help navigating re-entry. She is on Twitter [@endsolitary](#).

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

@Jean

They need a like button on here!

You made so many good points that Ill just say bravo!

:)

While I have no desire to see alleged terrorists set foot in the United States, I do believe they should be tried and all evidence put on the table regarding what they've been accused of and get the whole thing over and done with. What I have a real issue with is your assumption that you know better than the U.S. Government which has cleared quite a few of them of wrongdoing and cannot send them back to a neutral country that will guarantee their future actions. In other words, though cleared of wrongdoing, we keep them locked up because we don't know what else to do with them. To say that this group of people or that group of people do not deserve the same lawful protections that we Americans deserve is beyond absurd unless you never went to school in this country. A little document called the Declaration of Independence gave reasons why we had the right to throw off the bonds of despotism and made sure in the beginning of that document that it was their unanimous belief that people are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights and goes on to name them, one of which is Liberty. Endowed by their Creator does mean that these rights are inherent and does not mean that you get to pick and choose whether these rights go to a Republican or Democrat, a mentally ill individual, nor do you get to dictate according to religion who you get to take these rights from. That having been said, of course there are those of us who are dysfunctional and even violent and we cannot allow them to run rampant and terrorize society. There are those who simply must be locked up and there's no way to get around it. I have worked with many Federal inmates, all of them so-called violent offenders, assisting them with their legal work when filing their motions Pro Se and I can tell you with absolute certainty that a lot of them should not be there at all or if they were guilty, they got extreme sentences. I can't look at a court transcript of a trial where an FBI agent is lying through his teeth about what took place at a crime scene and then look at a witness statement where a witness says something completely different and wonder why no one thinks that extra 20 years makes any difference. I have gone through document after document and see the worst kind of lying imaginable, but because the defendant was guilty of the primary crime, all of those extra years don't seem to matter. There are a lot of taxpayers out there who are screaming that it does matter. I have talked to people who have been convicted of statutory rape, and yes, they do get some lengthy prison sentences and I actually know the family of one of them. No prior record, and the girlfriend didn't just deceive her boyfriend about her age, she deceived the whole family. While these situations aren't the most common, they certainly aren't a rarity, either. I work with these men using their court documents after they've gotten to prison, and they're in the hands of the COs, counselors, case workers, Psychologists and medical staff. I know that most of these people do the best they can under some very trying circumstances in an extremely toxic environment. You talk about the COs job and they do have to deal with the dregs of society, but unfortunately when doing that on a daily basis, it becomes routine, and you become desensitized to the way all of the inmates are treated in cookie cutter fashion and the next thing you know, you end up on the bad end of an abuse situation. Yes, the dysfunctional personalities go into prison and become worse, not better and the same thing happens to those COs who might have been good people going in but at some point the absolute power over other human beings appealed to their baser instincts and they succumbed to it. Your experience may be in the enforcement area of corrections but mine is in how those inmates got there to begin with. Prosecutorial Misconduct is rampant in this country, and has become so bad that The Center for Prosecutor Integrity opened up this year and I attended their first Innoence Summit in Washington, D.C. We most definitely have a problem in this country and in addition, Conviction Integrity Units are springing up in various cities across the country, all of these symptoms of a seriously broken criminal justice system. I have a special disdain for Solitary Confinement in its many forms. I understand the temporary need for it and have seen it actually help in very limited circumstances but the abuses far exceed what should be allowable. Solitary is used excessively and when done so, can be dangerous and I have escalated a report on one Psychologist who used it as a management tool for inmates who simply annoyed her, as she did Suicide Watch, and she also had restraints used against a non-violent inmate, against BOP regulations. She ended up being named, among others in a Federal Tort. At one point, in the beginning of her career, I'm sure she was a good employee. An inmate almost lost one of his legs and his life to her abuse. You have no idea who isn't and who is sentenced unfairly until you look at the court documents and start digging. The prisons just deal with whatever the prosecutor (not the judge) hands over to them. Everybody has to do their job. If only they would do their job and just leave it at that. I don't think anyone incarcerated is going to mistake prison for fun and the fact that an inmate physically ages from estimates ranging from 7 years to 11 years faster than people on the outside tells me somehow that there isn't much fun in incarceration. With crime rates lower than they've been in 40 years, and the federal inmate population increasing, you begin to wonder what's behind all of this. Are Americans really and truly the most criminally-inclined human beings on the planet? Are we really impossible to rehabilitate once we've gone bad? Other countries are doing it with much lower recidivism rates. Why are our prisons graying? Other countries aren't having this problem. Just maybe we need to be doing some things a little bit differently and not hanging on to the status quo for dear life. All of those wonderful programs? I have seen them take those drug programs and ditch them so that they could renovate the officers dining room, spare no expense. Those programs come and go at a whim. Also whatever state the inmate ends up in, has a lot to do with their recidivism rate. In some states they don't stand a chance because the laws are extremely antiquated but I'm working with my reentry people to see if and when this can be improved. I know that there are a lot of people out there who are very idealistic and attracted to the cause of criminal justice and prison reform and perhaps they may be just a bit naive. I would rather have them on my side, however, and perhaps learning the truth of things the hard way than have them trying to defend with equal naivete and uninformed justifications what cannot be defended. What we're doing is fiscally irresponsible and a moral abomination. There needs to be balance.

No, gitmo detainees should never be brought to the United States. They are terrorists/Prisoners of war, they do not deserve the same protections that Americans have. I think you people need to do more work as a CO and find out what it's really like instead of trying to dictate what goes on inside the prison. You people don't get it, some of these guys are violent and sick offenders, they will never be cured. The only ones that are sentenced unfairly are the drug and white collar crimes. FYI no inmate is in prison for the rape if they were 16 and 18 and consenting, that's a very far reach. They may be in prison and a rape charge may be in their criminal history but they are not in prison solely on that charge. Solitary confinement is used as a punishment to those who cannot follow the rules and regulations inside a prison, try working in one to understand it. You guys want us to make every thing fun up in here, yeah, that's smart make prison fun so coming back won't be a big deal. How about we teach them a little personal responsibility in here, maybe educate them, teach them a trade. wait we do and yet we still have high recidivism.

This issue is one I must comment on. I definitely agree with some of the statements and comments I have read so far. There is a definite

need for SuperMax prisons. Whether they are run by the states or Federal Government. The sad reality is that criminals do exist that warrant placement in those facilities. We shouldn't be concerned about their construction, we should be concerned about the people being placed in them. As for the individuals that are convicted for crimes that they were really not vicious or predatory, those individuals usually have the opportunity to work their way down in security levels through good behavior, which will also afford them the opportunity to be placed in minimum security facilities. I believe Solitarywatch is focused on the conditions and treatment within the institutions that contain the worst of the worst prisoners in our country.

Many of us are familiar with the ratio of non-violent to violent prisoners under BOP control. Too many of us are familiar with the fact that legal definitions of murder rape, sex offense and so forth, can be very different from the reality of what these people did to earn their bid in prison. A murderer isn't always the one who killed someone, the rapist includes the 18-year-old boy who had consensual sex with his 16-year-old girlfriend and so forth. We must, however, deal with the legal definitions because the courts recognize nothing else. Too many of these people who are labeled violent often are not, but our cookie cutter justice does allow for any gray area. You are what you have been charged with, whether you even knew that the other burglar had a weapon on him, whether the 20-year-old was pressured into going along with some rowdy friends who set something on fire, and whether she even touched or knew of the existence of that gas can. Twenty years in prison, forty, sixty, eighty or more. Our sentencing is out-of-control in this country, but are these people really violent? Does it really justify an extra 40-60 years in prison at a taxpayer cost of 33K-to-over-100k per year, per inmate, depending on their health care needs? If they weren't truly violent when they went in, they have a much higher chance of being violent when they get out and back into society, but you do NOT combat this trend by building another ADX. I've battled humane rights violations and civil rights violations perpetrated against the inmates to the point that I've often wondered which ones really belonged behind those bars. I know of jaws being broken, ribs fractured, inmates tied up while COs take turns beating and urinating on the inmate. How about 4-point restraints used on a non-violent inmate because staff decided they wanted to teach someone a lesson all against BOP rules? Prison is a toxic environment, and with most inmates eventually being released back to their communities, who do you want living next to you as your neighbor? Someone whose lived in sensory deprivation in a cell with little human contact? I'm not arguing against the complete abolishment of segregation but its use has to be limited to within the ability of the human mind to cope with it. I know very well what the ADX in Florence, CO can and still does to some of the inmates there. When it was built in 1994, it was touted as The Alcatraz of the Rockies and a place where only the worst of the worst was sent, worst of the worst meaning who they were really angry with, in addition to many infamous killers. Yes, I know that there are some who would kill for the sheer joy for it, but (A) they are in the minority, (B) they are the ones who you would truly classify as violent and (C) are they that way now because of what we've done to them or were they that way when they came into our broken prison system? You build another prison and add more beds, and they will be filled. Private prison corporations who make a profit off of the high number of inmates will make sure of it. Their survival depends on the highest prison occupation rate possible and hefty political campaign contributions ensure it. Congress is doing little with the bills they're trying to get passed which do very little to address the current overcrowding and might address it in a very small way, a few years down the road. The problem is NOW. You probably have as many horror stories as I do but one thing no one can argue with is that we cannot keep building more and more prisons, keep incarcerating at the current rate we do and keep sentencing people for most of their lives while putting far too many of them in segregation for too little reason. I would much rather be spending unnecessary prison tax dollars on what is very necessary education, infrastructure and the like. By the way, those elderly, non-violent and yes, even so-called violent inmates who decades ago, stopped being any threat to society, if they ever were needed to be released back to their families while they still have families left. There is no need to wait until these inmates are on oxygen, in wheelchairs, using crutches, etc., and running up the cost of their care, up to extremes. Our prisons are graying with old men and women, after sentences started increasing in length 20-30 years ago. The elderly inmates are the least likely to reoffend and the most costly to maintain in tax dollars, according to studies. We may have earned the reputation of being the most punitive country on the planet but enough of this. We didn't have this problem back in my youth when sentences were at least, rational. They've served their time. Yes, Gitmo prisoners should have gone to Thomson and those that we cleared should have been sent back but once again, our reactionary law-making got in the way. As for doing something to help, I'm in there swinging. I'm at Senate judiciary subcommittee meetings showing support, I'm writing letters to congressmen and The Sentencing Commission, BOP Director Samuels when a mentally ill inmate was being abused and about to lose his leg. I had to go up the chain of command, a painstaking process when an inmate leaves a pool of blood where he stands and every hour is critical. Then there's the local probation and parole chief I talked to yesterday, in order to see what problems they might be facing that I don't already know about and how could I help. I'm not alone, either. There are many of us out there, some more extreme than I am because they have a loved one they're fighting for, but were all fighting. We'll continue to fight the insanity of MASS INCARCERATION until our criminal justice system is no longer off-kilter, we have more balance and the Prison Industrial Complex isn't devouring us and our tax dollars alive.

One of the issues that I find so frustrating. The people of this country did a great disservice to the prisoners, and our way of life, when they refused to let the Gitmo prisoners be held at Thomson. For one our safety factor is much higher with them being there. Bush was turning them loose in foreign countries who then took them, and used their sense of mistreatment to their advantage against us. Instead of letting the ones go who should have been through due process. Secondly we have a lot higher standards of treatment than they are getting in military prison in Gitmo, or a foreign prison we release them too. One of the terrorist that was released from there was recently apprehended and was the master mind of plots towards American on American soil. This is the dilemma we face. However the prison, and the need for solitary confinement does exist. I retired from the corrections and there are people who need to be in solitary confinement. We have totally dismantled the mental health services in the United States in favor of privatization to use prisoners and the mentally ill for profit. After those victims create new victims, we put them in prison. We could save a lot of victims by addressing the mental health issue in this country that is exacerbated by things like the subsidies to big oil companies and the pollution they create. We have to wake up and connect the dots. We need to do something to help, not just condemn for detaining. I have seen inmates that kill for the joy, they need solitary confinement and mental health treatment both. But most of all they do not need to be walking around other humans that they will harm.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News