

# 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](#) | May 13, 2018

Solitary Watch obtained a copy of a letter to prison and corrections department officials, written by some of the men in the solitary confinement unit at Western Correctional Institution in Cumberland, Maryland, expressing their desire to meet with prison officials and discuss the conditions in their unit. The letter declared that if they did not receive a response and an agreement to meet, they would begin a protest on Monday, May 14, by covering their windows and initiating a hunger strike. Their list of demands began with a meaningful segregation review and the reassigning of staff they claim rarely interact with the men, demean them, and use racial slurs towards them. The men also call for access to library services, a meaningful incentive program, one monthly phone call, and confidential meetings with mental health personnel, which are currently conducted through the cracks of their doors. Solitary Watch will continue to cover the story of the protest as new information emerges.

*The Advocate* [reported](#) the closure of the solitary confinement unit Camp J at Angola Louisiana State Penitentiary, which resulted in the release of about 400 individuals into general population, according to the Louisiana Department of Corrections (DOC). The director of the advocacy organization Promise of Justice Initiative, Mercedes Montagnes, described Camp J as more akin to a dungeon, and explained that it was used to house individuals who were more in need of mental health treatment than disciplinary action. The closure of Camp J comes after the DOC partnered with the Vera Institute of Justice on the Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative aimed at reducing the use of solitary confinement. Despite closing the notorious unit, Louisiana continues to hold thousands of individuals in solitary confinement throughout the state.

*Fredericksburg.com* [reported](#) that the ACLU of Virginia has called on Gov. Ralph Northam to ban the use of solitary confinement in state prisons for longer than 15 days and prohibit the use of solitary confinement on vulnerable populations, especially individuals with mental illnesses. The ACLU released a [report](#) that found that Virginia has implemented some reforms since 2011, but that the state overuses the inhumane practice of solitary confinement. While the Virginia Department of Corrections disputes the findings of the report and claims to be a model for its limited use of solitary confinement, an individual recounted his experience in solitary confinement for more than six months at the Norfolk City Jail, where he said people are treated worse than zoo animals.

*NJ.com* published an [opinion article](#) written by the Star-Ledger Editorial Board arguing for a more effective mental health system in New Jersey and a reduction in the use of solitary confinement after four people committed suicide at Hudson County Jail within a year and six people committed suicide at Cumberland's jail within three years. The article points out the danger of neglecting treatment for individuals with mental illnesses, which can result in a cycle of incarceration, segregation, and perpetuation of mental illness. The authors recommend reviving a bill, which former Senator Ray Lesniak introduced and former Governor Chris Christie vetoed, that would limit the use of solitary confinement.

[According](#) to *Human Rights News, Views & Info*, the UK Joint Committee on Human Rights launched an inquiry into the use of physical restraints and solitary confinement on detained children in the UK. Last year, the Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales found that there was not a single establishment that we inspected in England in which it was safe to hold children and young people. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the UK stop placing children in solitary for any reason. The article reported that more than 38% of boys in detention have spent time in solitary confinement, with some spending more than 80 days in isolation.

The *Richmond-Times Dispatch* [reported](#) that Askari Danso, a 38-year-old man who has been incarcerated for twenty years, has been placed in solitary confinement at Sussex I facility in Virginia after organizing other incarcerated individuals to file grievances about medical services, water quality, and racial discrimination. Danso had worked as an educator in prison, teaching incarcerated people about Black history, facilitating Rastafarian programs, and organizing a politically conscious rap talent show, which a Department of Corrections investigator deemed an illegal black supremacy meeting. When corrections officials found a petition in Danso's cell, they charged him with organizing a group demonstration, though the officials initially claimed they placed him in solitary for gang related and rioting activities. Danso attributes his placement in solitary confinement to his political activity. You've got these prisons that are bursting at the seams. They're not open to the idea of prisoners being political, even if it's democratic.

*Prison Insider* published an [editorial](#) written by anthropologist, sociologist, and physician Didier Fassin, who examined the French prison

system after six deaths, four of which were suicides, occurred in one month at Fleury-Mrogis Prison south of Paris. Fassin found that France has the second highest rate of prison suicides in Europe, after Slovenia, and the suicide rate in France is twice as high among pretrial detainees, who are presumed innocent. He identified the most obvious source of the suicides as the individuals transfer to solitary confinement, where the risk of suicide increases fifteen-fold compared to being in an ordinary cell. Fassin calls for a reexamination of the disciplinary measures enforced within prisons and jails, outside of judges orders, especially the use of solitary confinement.

Valerie Kiebala 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

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.

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