

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2018/02/26/voices-from-solitary-returned-to-the-shu-in-california/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | February 26, 2018

In 2013, tens of thousands of people incarcerated throughout California launched a hunger strike to protest the policies of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) around indefinite isolation in solitary confinement (also known as indeterminate sentences). The strike lasted nearly 60 days and ended only after state lawmakers promised to hold hearings around the issue.

CDCR revised its policies after much pressure from people both inside and outside of its prisons, as well as the class-action lawsuit [Ashker v. Brown](#). The suit resulted in a settlement agreement on September 1, 2015. Under the [terms of the settlement agreement](#), people who have spent ten or more years in solitary in a Security Housing Unit (SHU) were to be placed in general population or a new general population unit specifically for people deemed to need intense supervision. However, even in this new unit, they would be able to be around other people, participate in group activities and have contact visits with their loved ones. The settlement also prohibited future SHU placements based on gang affiliation, and indeterminate SHU sentences.

Since then, thousands have been released from the SHU. Some have reported positive experiences as they adjusted to general population and, for the first time in years, were able to see the sky, move around outside, and access prison programs and support services. However, others have been sent to units and prisons where programs and services are not as accessible. In fact, their attorneys at the Center for Constitutional Rights recently [returned to court](#) to challenge conditions in the most restrictive units. Still other individuals have had the bitter experience of being released from the SHU only to land back there after short periods of time.

Mwalimu S. Shakur spent nearly three more years in the Security Housing Unit after the strike ended. In March 2016, he was released into general population, but his relative freedom was short-lived. A few months later, he was returned to the Security Housing Unit at Corcoran after someone told officers that he felt unsafe with Shakur on the yard. Shakur notes that he has spent the past year and a half in the SHU pending investigation and has not (yet) been charged. He describes his brief stay in general population and the changes (and lack of changes) in SHU conditions upon his return.

He welcomes letters from readers at: Mwalimu S. Shakur, s/n Terrance E. White, #AG8738, CSP-Corcoran, 4A-4L-24, PO Box 3476, Corcoran, CA 93212.

Victoria Law

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You would think after all the hard work of activism and organizing around the need to end long-term isolation, we would be given some form of compensation after our release back into general population. But no! There's no productive programs, be they educational, vocational and/or self-help. This means all you have is exercise equipment, a track to walk on, a basketball court and a handball wall as well as different areas assigned to the different racial groups to congregate in.

We're not afforded the rehabilitation opportunities needed to heal from the state-sanctioned mental torture we would need in order to be able to live productive lives in prison and once paroled back into society. For some of us, it's like learning to ride a bike all over again. The jobs afforded are kitchen workers, yard crew, and dorm porters. Because a lot of us are on maximum-custody yards, we can't enroll in vocational courses such as computer programming or substance abuse classes that also teach critical thinking.

We aren't even given a restoration of credits from our RVRs (rules violation reports, or 115s) for participating in so-called gang activity. Restoration would mean time off our prison sentences for good behavior.

On March 18, 2016, I was released from the SHU (Security Housing Unit) and placed in general population. I watched countless young Black men get into unnecessary arguments over sports teams they liked and over whose time it was on the phone or who owed whom for losing a bet. I enjoyed being around people and giving out history lessons of what prison used to be like when we all had jobs working in the prison industry making baked goods or in laundry/dry cleaning, painting, auto mechanics, and the underwater welding vocational trades they used to have. Now it's like watching a bunch of kids at the playground all day. We don't walk to the chow hall anymore, but are fed in our cells.

But to see the sun and hear birds sing allows one to feel human again. I also like the smell of fresh-cut grass. It makes you realize what things were actually taken away because, in reality, none of these sensations is afforded to you in solitary confinement.

After a few months of enjoying these everyday pleasures of freedom, my world closed down and I was placed back into the abyss of solitary confinement due to someone (not known to me) telling the COs that he felt threatened by my presence. I can't lie and say that I did not feel hurt and betrayed by someone who most likely was coerced into saying he felt threatened by COs in order for them to have a reason to place me back into solitary.

Attempting to challenge this neglectful process that CDCR has failed to fix has resulted in them bringing a lot of us back inside the slave torture chamber where continued psychological torture practices happen all over again. For organizing a boycott of the canteen and package vendor, one individual was brought back, and for holding an educational class on the yard (think tank) to build social practices and teach about the economy and how politics works, another was brought in, and then for writing up an officer (per 602 grievance form) for not giving us yard programs when allowed, another inmate was brought back. All of us share our stories of these things when we see each other on the yard or at medical.

My neighbor, a northern Mexican who was in my old SHU building, arrived a few months ago. He informed me that CDCR has made mention of having inmate provocateurs on the yard to inform them of which inmates are being so-called disruptive after being released from the SHU. We both know this to be true because it's always been CDCR's tactic to sabotage organizing efforts, jailhouse lawyers, and activist work (challenging the prison conditions and lack of programs) because we are disturbing the social order of how prisons control their subjects.

The changes in solitary are minimal. You can only have four packages, increased from only one a year. Now, every three months, you can order a package. You can still have personal clothes (sweatsuit shorts, thermal underwear, socks, t-shirts), hygiene items (soap, toothpaste, deodorant, lotion, shampoo) and food. We can now have phone calls.

Before our hunger strike, I couldn't call home or receive any of those items in my package. Now I can call home once a week or once a month, depending on my status. If you have a job in general population or are enrolled in school, you can have one weekly phone call. If not, then you can call monthly. You're still escorted in shackles everywhere, but in the phone cage, the COs remove your shackles. You get only 15 minutes, but calling home feels really good and I squeeze in about five minutes to talk to everybody. They give us privacy and go into the office, but the COs can see you so they know when you're done.

If you don't get through to your loved one, you are afforded the opportunity to try again the next week. I haven't been given a determinate SHU sentence because there's actually no charge. I'm just being held pending investigation.

I've read in newsletters and periodicals that other prisoners are going through similar incidents and being returned to the SHU. *California Prison Focus* and *Turning the Tide* newsletters have spoken to this action, but the struggle continues and we won't stop our efforts to transform the prison system. These are the same old practices CDCR has done before, but we will challenge our conditions and hold CDCR to their work and wake up the minds of the next generation who the fascists would like to see take our place.

Until all oppressed are free,
Mwalimu S. Shakur

Dare to struggle,
Dare to win

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 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.

Please don't give up .

Thank you. I send you great blessings through my tears. I did Solitary time but not to the level you are.. But I get it. And you.. And those like you still there are why I share and fight daily.

Thank you for this heart rending, beautifully written update. It rips my heart apart to hear of your struggle to be the best human being you can with the lack of opportunities for self improvement. I simply cannot understand the cruel mentality of those in charge of depriving you of activities which would assist you in becoming a thriving, productive person both inside this prison, and also in society once you are released. I send you great blessings.

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