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by Jean Casella and James Ridgeway | November 9, 2011

In thelatest issue of the*Portland Phoenix*, Lance Tapley interviews Maines new corrections commissioner, Joseph Ponte.Before Pontes appointment,a grassroots movement in Maineraised public awareness around use and abuse of solitary confinement in Maine State Prisons Special Management Unit (SMU), and led to an attempt to pass legislation limiting solitary. Since he was installed last winter,Ponte has instituted reforms in the SMU, reducing its average population by about two-thirds. A few excerpts follow; the interview can be read in full on the Portland Phoenixs site.

YOUVE MADE BIG CHANGES ESPECIALLY IN THE SPECIAL MANAGEMENT UNIT AND THE MAINE STATE PRISON AS A WHOLE. IS THIS SOMETHING THAT YOU WANTED TO DO BEFORE YOU CAME TO MAINE? No. It was waiting for me when I arrived. There had been threats of lawsuits by the ACLU. A substantial committee had been put together that had worked for a good amount of time to develop what the concerns were. So I put a group together led by Rod Bouffard from the Long Creek youth facility to make the changes. And youre right, there have been substantial changes. It is a big deal. Its a lot for a staff to adjust to. Its a whole different way of doing business.

I get asked the question: Do you get a lot of staff resistance? Well, we had trained staff for many, many years to do business a certain way, and now were telling them heres another way of doing business. It took a good deal of leadership by Warden [Patricia] Barnhart and Charlie Charlton, the SMU unit manager, to convince staff there is another way, and try this, and its worked.

HOW DO YOU KNOW ITS WORKED?We have 60 beds that have been closed for three or four months. Were utilizing about 40-something beds on any given day. So inmates that were typically locked up in segregation are now being managed in general population. Segregation tends not to fix the problem that the inmate needs to address.

We had to measure the outcomes. Did we increase inmate violence? And every measure weve had, first in segregation the acting out, the use of chemicals, the use of force, use of restraint chair those numbers have dropped significantly, so segregation is a better place. And then we took those same measurements and looked at them in population inmate assaults, staff assaults, use of force did they increase after we limited the use of segregation to the more violent offenders? All of our data show us that the situation actually has improved and not gotten worse.

HOW DO YOU ACCOUNT FOR THE IMPROVEMENT IN GENERAL POPULATION? The effectiveness of our staff interacting with inmates and changing behavior. Locking them up in segregation didnt change the behavior. Instead, we do informal sanctions, like you lose your recreation time, or you lose your commissary privileges, or youre locked in your cell for a period of time.

PEOPLE WHO WERE PUT INTO SEGREGATION BECAUSE THEY WERE ALLEGED TO BE VIOLENT, YOURE NOW PUTTING THEM INTO GENERAL POPULATION, AND YOURE SAYING YOURE ACTUALLY GETTING LESS VIOLENCE NOW? Thats correct.

WHAT CAUSES THAT? Face-to-face interaction starts the process where the officers know the offender, they know what the issues are, they work on the issues. An inmate fight would be a good example. It used to be they would go to seg. They would do their disciplinary time in seg. It might take two or three months, that whole process. Now an inmate gets into a fight, theyll go to seg and be evaluated. We would decide, after talking with the inmate and staff, can these guys go back in population. If they had a little disagreement and there were no serious injuries, theyll probably go back either in the same housing unit or in some cases the fighters will be separated

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received

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Most encouraging but there will be staunch hold outs in Arizona, California,Colorado and many other places that have made their SMUs or SHUs an essential element of their prison management plan to remove predators and other political prisoners out of sight and out of mind to maintain a safe and secure environment for the other prisoners. Focus should be on those closed minded systems and bring pressure to manage prisons differently just like Maine has acknowledged that when done right, it will work to reduce those expensive solitary confinement beds and the expenses associated with such custody placement. Kudos to the DOC leaders for being bold enough to take those first steps for change. Perhaps their steps will be used to mold or shape future changes elsewhere.

Well, this is certainly a start; I hope this change in attitude spreads to other states where the population in solitary is much greater. Punishment that qualifies as torture violates the Constitutions stricture against cruel & unusual punishment, & I think theres little doubt that long-term solitary confinement constitutes torture.

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