

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2014/08/07/voices-from-solitary-cruel-and-unusual-punishment-for-transgender-women/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | August 7, 2014

Dee Dee is a transgender woman serving a sentence of 60 years to life in New York State, where she has been held in men's prisons. After being raped twice in general population, she was placed in solitary confinement for her own protection, in conditions virtually identical to those used for punishment. In this letter to Solitary Watch, Dee Dee describes in detail the conditions of extreme isolation and deprivation in which she lives, and the effect they have had on her. For more stories and information on transgender women in the New York State prison system, see the accompanying article, [Transgender Women in New York State Prisons Face Solitary Confinement and Sexual Assault](#). Aviva Stahl

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I'm currently in solitary confinement under the status of Involuntary Protective Custody (I.P.C.) since 2-14-2013. Overall, I've been in continuous solitary confinement for 4 straight years.

I'm allowed only 1 hour outside to use weights (if available), phone and T.V., or to play cards or basketball (if they're provided but usually aren't). The one hour goes by too quickly. We inmates spend so much of it talking and socializing. You can readily identify the detrimental effects of our solitary existence by the hurried way we socialize. The personal contact is a great need; the interaction is non-stop about everything, anything and nothing as guys try to work-out or play games. Mostly, it's guys complaining how bad things are for us and negative talk of possible solutions which go nowhere. Nothing really constructive is discussed.

Our cells have solid doors with a small window about the size of two paperback novels placed side-by-side. You can only see directly in front of your own cell. You can't really hear anything outside the cell due to blower vents in our cell that circulate air in and out of our cells being so loud. The walls are basically sound-proof being of solid cement. Although the cells are designed for disciplinary solitary confinement it is nice because it's supposed to house 2 inmates, but when used for protection use, inmates are housed by themselves; hence, plenty of room. But the main thing is the inability to hear anything outside your cell. And to compound this, when lists are taken for our 1 hour yard or 10 minute gallery phone use, COs rarely announce themselves or that a list is being taken. Inmates new to the unit have no idea what is going on because no rule book is available, nor does staff give a rundown of how things run in the unit. Many miss the lists. I suffer daily anxiety by waiting at my door a hour before the lists are *supposed* to come just so I don't miss it because C.O.s come with the lists at anytime a before or after the list is *supposed* to be taken.

There are no interactions from your cell with anyone for 23 hours a day aside from C.O.s delivering your food trays 3 times a day. You can try to yell through the door but it's a hassle because your voice barely gets through and you have to repeat yourself over and over. We have a recreation pen (rec. pen) at the back of our cells where you can go outside but it's like being in a dog kennel. We're told that the rec pen is our additional out-of-cell time; indicated in the New York Department Directives for protective custody units.

Our phone access is restricted even though we are not disciplinary restricted; as phone use is a privilege that can only be restricted by a disciplinary hearing sanction for rule violations. We wrote grievances but even when we win the staff in this block refuse to obey the decisions. They adhere to their own unwritten policy.

Our protection unit is housed in the Special Housing Unit block (SHU), which is a disciplinary solitary confinement unit for inmates who've violated facility or department rules and regulations. And because of that staff can quote security reasons as a basis for any unfair restrictions they arbitrarily apply to us to make their jobs easier. There's no rule book and the block is run in part (to resemble legitimacy) by what Department of Corrections policy and directives dictate and what staff have made up in order to allow us the *VERY MINIMUM* (most time we have less than) what we're entitled to.

We have a general library cart with about 40 books that is sent about every 3 months that's brought cell-to-cell every Tuesday night. The books are all garbage and not worth reading. Grievances and complaints were made and the general librarians' response was to fill the cart with really bad choices. Even the CO who rolls the cart around said it was a shame. This is just one example of the treatment we endure besides the having to endure 23 hours of solitary.

I personally went on hunger strike to bring attention to the conditions and treatment here. And although I obtained a one-on-one audience

with the Executive Staff of the facility I was just yesd to death and *NOTHING* was done to change anything. Their only response was to transfer everyone they could who wrote grievances or complained. However, myself and 4 others cannot be transferred due to the safety needs we require. Transfers are always staffs response in any facility, to problems they face when inmates speak up.

In addition, staff harasses us for the grievances we write. One inmate had his cells contents destroyed during a random cell search. His 3rd in a few weeks. And he got a disciplinary ticket for misc. thing, as an attempt to put him in disciplinary solitary confinement. Retribution is and has always been a tactic staff employs to deter inmates from writing grievances and/or shedding light on the staffs policy and procedures we have to endure.

Im blessed to have support and fill my 23 hours of lockdown by doing legal work, studying, reading, and drawing some. However, Ive been here over a year with no access to a pencil sharpener; because this block is a SHU block and one isnt provided. The only allowable pencil sharpeners were allowed to order from outside vendors are no longer produced. Ive written grievances and complained but nothing is being done.

I find solitary confinement here *very detrimental* to ones mental health. Cell lights are kept on at night for SHU inmates for legitimate security reasons, but theyre put on for us as well. When I complained I was told that they stay on (even though they can specifically turn ours off) because were housed in a SHU block, so we get treated the same. Yet, SHU inmates have a mailbox wheeled to each of their cells to ensure their mail is actually being sent out. But we, on the other hand, are told we dont get a mail cart because were not SHU inmates. So COs pick our mail up by hand and we hope they put it in the mailbox to go out. However, grievances and mail of complaints have been known to disappear and never get to the mailbox. Which can be detrimental to any legal or policy time constraints. The mental stress of this and other flip-flopping policy is very intense. You never know where you stand.

I had a friend, DeMario Parks, who was in this SHU back in 2001. He mentally broke and hung himself. A few years later the Office of Mental Health did a study on the effects of solitary confinement. This study resulted in being the backbone of a lawsuit against the NY State Dept of Corrections that produced sweeping changed for inmates who were mentally ill and placed in solitary confinement where their mental conditions deteriorated and they wound up getting more and more disciplinary tickets that would keep them in solitary for years. The study, I encourage you to read, is available from the Office of Mental Health or the New York State Commission of Corrections, which is a watchdog agency.

The restricted contact with others is the hardest part to deal with. As humans we need to socialize in order to stay relevant with societal norms, etc. Prison is already a very lonely place for many of us. This lack of interaction promotes anti-social behavior. Ive stayed in my cell for months because I felt anti-social, frustrated, angry etc and wanted nothing to do with anyone here. Im currently doing so now . The mental ups and downs are an ordeal. Mental health is no help. Their services are either to prescribe medications or instruct you in coping skills so you can endure more of this cruel & unusual punishment INSTEAD of alleviating the root of the problem causing the distress.

Most letters to staff go ignored. Youre basically screaming on deaf ears. Our one hour of yard is usually 45 minutes due to staff bringing us out late or bringing us in early. Our minimum is ONE HOUR, but we rarely get it. A grievance, from experience, gets you harassed and/or not let out for yard at all. Staff knows if you complain of a missed yard it cant be rectified, so they get away with it.

Theres no programming or classes or any type of rehabilitation work you can do in here either. The mind stagnates. The only thing offered is cell study which is for inmates looking to get a GED which theyll never take a test for until they get out of solitary. Cell study is totally self-study by text books with no instruction at all. I currently convinced the cell study staff to provide me with vocational text books, so that I can study on my own topics such a Masonry, Home Electrical Wiring and Business Practices. Thats all one can do.

The frustrations here are immense. Tempers flare all over. Mostly because a lot of what goes on makes no logical sense. And I know staff sees that but they dont care.

Currently, Im trying to get a transfer somewhere very beneficial to my long-term future in prison. I have 35 more years before I see parole board. So I have to stay out of trouble by staying below the radar with staff so as to not to jeopardize it. So I accept the oppression and mistreatment and meekly do what I need to do to get out of here (hopefully). Its a sad existence but it is what it is. We are basically voiceless here.

Others are unfortunately left to endure this oppressive lonely place. I cant tell you how many times Ive talked myself out of self-destructive behavior or harmful behavior here out of the frustrating desperations I experience here.

Solitary confinement is punishment, sure but its a cruel and unusual punishment that benefits no one and nothing about it rehabilitates anymore thus confined. Their behavior stays the same (and/or gets worse) and they usually stay within the cycle of coming back to solitary or never getting out of it.

Lastly, Id like to mention that in December of 2001 I was released from prison (on a previous incarceration). I was sent directly into society after 2 years of solitary confinement for protection. No transitional program or preparation was provided. No assistance or guidance or counseling either as to what to expect or what I needed to do on the outside after 10 years in prison. From 23 hours of solitary confinement to 24/7 wide-open society in the snap of your fingers. I arrived in New York City post 9-11 paranoid, nervous, bitter, and scared of everyone around me. It was too much to handle at once. Six days later, still feeling way, way out of place, I killed my boyfriend in a domestic dispute. I believe the solitary confinement in addition to no outside help or counseling by the office of parole contributed to this tragedy. I was just left to my own devices that were woefully inadequate for the task.

The HALT bill is a good start but applicability will be a challenge especially due to funding. Money, sadly, dictates not what is best but what we can only afford. For one of the richest countries on earth we should be able to do better.

I encourage everyone to add to our voices to advocate for change so that your friends and your loved ones who are unfortunately are incarcerated return to society better mentally and emotionally then when they came to prison. Even if youve no friends or family in here, they still will be among you in society so do what will benefit society as a whole. It all affects us. Rehabilitate dont punish.

STOP SOLITARY CONFINEMENT.

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

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A harrowing and pitiful existence within the prison system sanctioned and ignored by the state. Absolutely disgraceful.

(p.s when clicking the facebook like, which opens the window allowing to leave the additional comment before it posts on my page, the drop box is obscured by text below making it impossible to confirm and allow the post to be made.) Im sure you will see a massive surge in supporters via your share options once you sort this out so dont be disheartened by the apparently low numbers of friends sharing currently!)

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