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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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close

Search

close

close

Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | July 29, 2019

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* [reported](#) that U.S. District Court Judge Billy Ray issued an injunction for Fulton County, Georgia, to release mentally ill women from solitary confinement within 30 days. The Georgia Advocacy Office filed a lawsuit on behalf of 30 to 40 women held at South Fulton Municipal Regional Jail in April, presenting evidence that the women have been held in prolonged solitary in cells and clothes caked with feces, vomit, and blood. One woman broke down during her testimony, saying she was trapped in her cell for weeks and was only allowed two showers and one change of clothes in four months. Ray called the conditions repulsive and ordered the county to present a plan within 30 days for the women to be housed in a clean, safe, and social environment. Southern Center for Human Rights attorney for the plaintiffs Sarah Geraghty said, The extreme and extended isolation imposed on women at the jail and the appalling conditions there have long been a recipe for disaster. This order is probably going to save someones life.

The *Idaho Press* [reported](#) that Idaho Maximum Security Institution warden Keith Yordy is considering ways for people held in solitary confinement to participate in congregate activities. One idea was provided by a man in the solitary unit at the prison, who anonymously slipped it to corrections staff. He conceived of a table where people could meet from within locked compartments, with their hands free for activities at the table, and also provided a model constructed from a cardboard box and most likely contraband supplies, such as tape and a razor. The man called it the secure socialization module, and emphasized that the socialization should never be forced, instead, people should only socialize in the module if they request it. Idaho prison officials are also considering programming desks as a secure way to provide out-of-cell time, where incarcerated people could participate in classes while shackled to desks, as is the practice in several other states, as an initial way for people to safely spend time outside of their cells. Currently, the Idaho Department of Corrections holds over 200 people in solitary.

The *Orlando Sentinel* published an [op-ed](#) written by Florida Senator Randolph Bracy III, calling for his state to end the use of solitary confinement after he recently visited a solitary cell. He said, The frigid concrete space featured a bare toilet and little else. I was struck by how small and enclosed it was. It became immediately clear to me how confinement to a space so austere, both materially and psychologically, could result in grave damage to one's mental state. According to the Florida Justice Institute, 80 people committed suicide in the custody of the Florida Department of Corrections between January 2013 and August 2018, and 72 of those people were either in solitary confinement when they died or had previously been in solitary. Too many deaths in Florida's prisons have resulted from solitary confinement, Bracy said. Its time for the Florida Legislature to step up and end this inhumane practice.

Cynthia Link, the superintendent of Pennsylvania's Graterford Prison from 2015 to 2018, wrote an [article](#) published in *PennLive* about the effect of death row conditions on correctional officers. Link said, Nothing prepared me for the level of human suffering I experienced in the restricted housing unit where death-sentenced prisoners are held. Even though correctional officers can only work on death row for a maximum of two years, Link says the stress is seldom-discussed but undeniably real, sometimes even leading to suicide. Pennsylvania has not executed anyone since 1999, so while death row was designed as temporary housing, some people have not left their cells in years, according to Link, and have not had human contact in decades. Link urges state legislators to factor in the human toll [the death penalty] takes on Pennsylvania's corrections profession. Death sentences punish them, too.

BBC HARDtalk [interviewed](#) Angola 3 member Albert Woodfox about his nearly 45 years in solitary confinement at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, originally a slave plantation, and the role that institutional and personal racism played in the incarceration, brutality, and torture he experienced. BBC tweeted [video footage](#) from the interview, in a clip of Woodfox describing in detail the cell he was locked in for over four decades. Its kind of hard to find the words, Woodfox said, to imagine the horror of being confined to a nine feet long and six feet wide cell. And you stay in there for 23 hours. Now multiply that a million times, and to add to that, you know that absolutely nothing you can do can change the situation you're in.

The website of Senator and presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren published a [press release](#), announcing that Warren has called for an investigation into the use of solitary confinement as a means to coerce detained immigrants to work for \$1 a day in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities. In a letter to Acting Inspector General of the Department of Homeland Security Jennifer Costello, Warren pointed to lawsuits against private contractors GEO Group and CoreCivic, claiming the companies used solitary confinement and a deprivation scheme in various ICE facilities to benefit from forced labor, in violation of the Trafficking Victims Protection

Reauthorization Act. Referring to a letter between a top GEO official and ICE officials, Warren said, GEOs private claim that ICE policies require, recommend, or allow the use of solitary confinement to coerce participation in a voluntary work program is alarming.

Senators Chuck Grassley and Richard Blumenthal, both of whom sit on the Judiciary Committee overseeing the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, sent a letter to ICE director Matthew Albence, [according](#) to *The Intercept*. The letter asked for data on the use of solitary confinement in ICE facilities, the development of a system to document the use of solitary, and the methods ICE uses to ensure that solitary is only used as appropriate and required. The Senators cited the findings of recent Department of Homeland Security investigations and said, It is imperative that ICE swiftly resolve any lacking oversight or improper documentation pertaining to the use of segregation, or solitary confinement. Grassley is the first Republican on the committee to demand answers from ICE on this issue.

WSKG [reported](#) that advocates in New York continue to fight for stricter limits on solitary confinement, after legislators failed to bring the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act to a vote. The bill would have brought New York in alignment with the United Nations Mandela Rules, which call for a ban on solitary confinement for longer than fifteen days. Organizer with the New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (CAIC) Scott Paltrowitz said, In New York, people regularly spend months and years and even decades in solitary confinement. People have spent 30 years (there). Its barbaric. It has to stop. While Governor Andrew Cuomo opposed the bill, in part on the basis of the cost of building new facilities, CAIC advocate Victor Pate says the current units could be converted. Advocates say they will come back when the legislative session resumes to support the HALT bill.

Bonnie Kerness, the program director of American Friends Service Committee Prison Watch, wrote an [op-ed](#) for *NJ.com*, commending the signing of the Isolated Confinement Restriction Act and calling attention to the importance of the enforcement and oversight of the bill. Calling the bill a first step, Kerness says that the bill does not address the conditions of unconscionable heat, filth, and vermin in the units nor does it address the culture of officer abuse, of psychiatric neglect, of the development of permanent mental health symptoms of post traumatic stress. The legislation gave the New Jersey Department of Corrections thirteen months to devise a policy based on the regulations in the bill, and Kerness callson community members to do our due diligence in monitoring the promulgation of these regulations and continue our vigilance in scrutinizing what these men and women are experiencing in their cages.

TheAdvocate [reported](#) that Chin, a transgender man from Hong Kong who was detained at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Irwin County Immigration Detention Center in Georgia, has been released from solitary confinement. Chin spent nineteen months in solitary for his gender identity, and says he was not provided proper health care during that time, a common occurrence for transgender people in detention. After pressure from the National Queer Asian Pacific Alliance (NQAPA), Chin was transferred to another ICE facility in Dallas, where he no longer is being held in solitary.

Valerie Kiebal 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

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P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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