

National Religious Campaign Against Torture

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<http://www.nrcat.org/about/nrcat-press-releases/1220-new-jersey-governor-signs-historic-bill-restricting-solitary-confinement>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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New Jersey Governor Signs Historic Bill Restricting Solitary Confinement

Washington, DC - On July 11, 2019, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy signed into law the first fully comprehensive legislation limiting the use of solitary confinement enacted by a state legislature. The Isolated Confinement Restriction Act (A314/S3261) passed the Senate in a 26-3 vote and the Assembly in a 49-24 vote with 5 abstentions.

Across the United States, momentum to end the use of solitary confinement has grown tremendously as a result of coordinated campaigns led by survivors of solitary and their families, mental health professionals, legal advocates, and faith leaders.

"The Isolated Confinement Restriction Act shows that our legislators are exemplifying the type of political courage that we all need. It shows that they are on the right side of justice by curbing torture inside of New Jersey prisons," said Johnny Perez, New Jersey resident and Director of the U.S. Prisons Program for the National Religious Campaign Against Torture.

A similar bill cleared the New Jersey legislature in 2016 and was vetoed by then-Governor Chris Christie. Advocates with the New Jersey Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement continued education and advocacy efforts to end the torture of solitary confinement. The coalition includes formerly incarcerated individuals, several faith communities and organizations, the ACLU of New Jersey, and Health Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE), the labor union that represents nurses in New Jersey prisons.

"To live in prolonged solitary confinement is to be denied your basic humanity, and to experience such extreme loneliness that it can feel as if the world has forgotten you," said Justice Rountree, an organizer with NJ-CAIC and a survivor of prolonged solitary confinement in New Jersey. "Today, because of Gov. Murphy's signature, those who have ever been in solitary, and those who are held in isolated confinement now, know they are not forgotten. Survivors of solitary know that because of their collective efforts, New Jersey will no longer maintain the status quo of their suffering."

An increasing number of state legislatures and corrections officials are embracing humane alternatives to solitary confinement. In 2017, the Colorado Department of Corrections eliminated solitary confinement beyond 15 days. North Dakota Corrections Director Leann Bertsch has implemented similar reforms, inspired by rehabilitative-centered alternatives she witnessed in corrections departments in Norway. In 2019, 28 state legislatures introduced bills limiting the use of solitary.

The New Jersey law, which goes into effect on August 1, 2020, places limitations for consecutive days spent in solitary (20 days) and maximum number of days in solitary within a 60-day period (30 days). Also, it prohibits any member of vulnerable populations, as classified by clinical staff, from being placed in isolation. Vulnerable populations include people aged 21 and younger, people aged 65 and older, people with developmental disability, people with a disability based on mental illness, people with serious medical conditions, and people who are pregnant.

"New Jersey has just shown historic moral leadership on ending the torture of solitary confinement by law -- giving hope and comfort to every family member in the state who has a loved one in prison," said Rev. Ron Stief, Executive Director of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture. "This law can, and will, be a model for other states and the federal government to once and for all close the chapter on this shameful era of torture in U.S. prisons, jails and detention centers."

The National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) is a membership organization committed to ending U.S.-sponsored torture, and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Since its formation in January 2006, more than 300 religious organizations have joined NRCAT, including representatives from the Catholic, evangelical Christian, mainline Protestant, Unitarian Universalist, Quaker, Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Bahai, Buddhist, and Sikh communities. Members include national denominations and faith groups, regional organizations and local congregations.

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