

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/08/06/massachusetts-prisons-see-epidemic-of-suicides/>

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close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | August 6, 2010

On July 15, an inmate hanged himself in his cell at the Old Colony Correctional Center in Bridgewater, bringing the number of suicides in Massachusetts state prisons this year to eight. The rate of suicides, which so far averages one a month, is four times the national average.

According to the [Boston Globe](#), prisoner advocates calls for an urgent response from state officials have spurred the administration of Governor Duval Patrick to hire a suicide prevention specialist. Yet Massachusetts prisons have been ignoring many of the recommendations made by the same specialist three years ago, especially when it comes to placing suicidal prisoners in isolation. In addition, the state has shelved plans to build a special treatment facility for mentally ill prisoners, who account for a majority of the suicides.

The inmate who committed suicide on July 15 was a 51-year-old man who had a long history of mental illness and had attempted suicide several times before. His aunt told the *Globe's* Jonathan Saltzman that he mutilated himself in prison and ate batteries. She also said that prison officials knew of his history with mental issues. He was on their watch, and this happened.

Massachusetts had another rash of suicides in 2006, seven in all. In response, the state hired Lindsay M. Hayes, the same suicide prevention specialist it has now retained once again. According to the *Globe*:

In February 2007, following seven suicides the previous year, Hayes issued a 63-page report that found serious shortcomings in the state's handling of inmates at risk for suicide. The state immediately pledged to comply with all 29 recommendations in his report, and suicides fell.

But advocates question whether the state has lived up to its promise. Inmates who spent time on suicide watches in the past two years, [Leslie] Walker [executive director of Boston-based Prisoners Legal Services] said, told her that officials placed them in barren cells, made them change from regular prison garb into gowns, revoked routine privileges such as family visits, and deprived them of belongings, including books, mail, family photographs, and toiletries.

Hayes's 2007 report had urged that such practices be avoided because they exacerbate a sense of isolation and discourage some inmates from reporting suicidal feelings, but Walker said they persist.

There's a lack of vigilance and compliance with Hayes's recommendations, said Walker, who added that she planned to write Commissioner Harold W. Clarke about what she called an epidemic, a crisis within the state prison system. In response, the Correction Departments [Diane] Wiffin said suicide prevention is a top priority and we have made significant investments to protect the prisoners in our care.

But the state of Massachusetts has in fact reneged what is perhaps on the most significant investment it could have made to protect the prisoners in its care and keep them from taking their own lives. According to an [earlier article](#) by Saltzman in the *Boston Globe*:

The nonprofit Disability Law Center sued the state in March 2007, alleging that hundreds of mentally ill prisoners were kept in closet-size solitary confinement cells in response to unruly behavior. The conditions had led to self-mutilation, the swallowing of razor blades, and numerous suicides, said the center.

A *Globe* Spotlight Team series in December 2007 reported 15 suicides in the prisons from 2005 through 2007, most by those in solitary confinement with histories of mental illness or drug addiction. There had also been more than 3,200 suicide attempts and self-inflicted injuries in the prior decade, the *Globe* found.

The suit, which resembled legal challenges that led to changes in other states, said Massachusetts ignored repeated calls from its mental health providers and consultants to provide high-security treatment units for violent, mentally disturbed inmates.

A tentative agreement was reached, but in November 2009 the state backed out, citing the fiscal crisis. The state has no plans to build a new mental health facility, and the suit will go to trial at some point in the future.

The relationship between mental illness, solitary confinement, and suicide in Massachusetts prisons seems abundantly clear. Yet the Correction Departments Diane Wiffin told Saltzman, following the July suicide: While privacy concerns prevent us from commenting about specific cases, our initial reviews have found no common trends.



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 a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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 [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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How many are Wounded Warriors Incarcerated suffering from untreated combat PTSD/Traumatic Brain Injury/Agent Orange  
The War Widows  
[mmurphy@veteranschamberofcommerce.org](mailto:mmurphy@veteranschamberofcommerce.org)

Your lede begins: On July 15, an inmate hung himself in his cell at the Old Colony Correctional Center in Bridgewater The correct word is hanged.

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