

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebala](#) | June 24, 2019

The New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinements #HALTSolitary campaign released a [statement](#) in response to the failure of the New York legislature to pass the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act, which would have banned solitary for longer than fifteen days across New York State and implemented effective alternatives to isolation. Although it had enough votes to pass in both houses, Senate majority leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins and Assembly Speaker Carl Hastie refused to bring the bill to a vote, instead engaging with Governor Andrew Cuomo to negotiate what the #HALTSolitary campaign calls a backroom deal. This is a package of [limited reforms](#), apparently proposed by the governor, that would be implemented administratively with no clear timeline. Advocates say that New York legislative leadership subverted democracy and turned their backs on people in solitary confinement, and called on them to go Southport Prison an entire prison of solitary confinement and personally apologize, cell by cell, to every person inside.

[According](#) to the ACLU, the New Jersey Senate and Assembly voted last Thursday to pass the Isolated Confinement Restriction Act, which would set strict time limits on the use of solitary confinement in New Jersey state prisons and jails, and prohibit isolating vulnerable populations, including youth, elderly people, LGBTQ people, people with psychiatric disabilities, and pregnant women. The bill now awaits the signature of Gov. Phil Murphy. Though former Gov. Chris Christie vetoed the bill in 2016, Murphy has expressed support for the bill. Rev. Charles Boyer of Salvation and Social Justice, part of the New Jersey Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (NJCAIC), said, Our legislators have made the right choice today, as they did in 2016. And we trust our governor will take the bold step necessary to ensure that New Jersey corrections system is more humane and, ultimately, safer for all involved.

The *Associated Press*, in collaboration with the University of Maryland's *Capital News Service*, conducted an [investigation](#) into high rates of suicides in local jails across the country. Of the 400 lawsuits alleging abuse of incarcerated people that were examined in the investigation, 135 people died by suicide and 30 attempted. Most deaths are not represented in lawsuits, however, and in 2014, the Department of Justice documented 372 suicides across about 3,000 jails. In one case, 35-year-old psychiatrically disabled Janene Wallace spent 51 days in isolation at George W. Hill Correctional Facility in Pennsylvania, where she was held for a probation violation. Janene committed suicide, after a guard taunted her to do so. In Dane County, Wisconsin, people with mental illness are isolated, the sheriff says, because they have nowhere else to house them. Its inhumane, he said, but were forced into a situation to keep these people alive. Several counties have paid millions in wrongful death settlements and begun instituting reforms, but suicide remains the leading cause of death in U.S. jails.

[According](#) to NPR, pregnant women continue to be held in solitary confinement in prisons and jails across the U.S., though no data exists to tell us how many women face isolation during their pregnancy. Gynecology and obstetrics professor at John Hopkins Dr. Carolyn Sufrin said, Solitary confinement is in no way, shape, or form something that a pregnant person should be placed in, due to the harmful effects, both psychologically and physically. Sufrin says that being confined to a small space for a long period of time can increase the risk of dangerous blood clots for pregnant women, in addition to dangerous situations arising from the impaired access to medical care. Some states have begun to reexamine the practice of isolating pregnant women, and a law passed this year in Maryland will ban the use of solitary for pregnant women in prison.

The *Des Moines Register* [reported](#) that the federal trial began last week for a class action lawsuit filed by Disability Rights Iowa against the use of isolation and restraints at the Iowa State Training School for Boys at Eldora. Psychiatrist Stuart Grassian testified that one boy faced 12.5 hours of isolation because he continued to fart after staff told him to stop, though the boy said he could not stop due to his lactose intolerance. Psychologist Andrea Weisman called the restraint wrap akin to a torture device. While the director of Iowa Department of Human Services called the school the boys last hope, Grassian and Weisman testified that the use of solitary and restraints re-triggers trauma for many of the boys, which could lead to aggressive behavior and lasting psychological harm. The trial is ongoing and at its completion, the judge will decide how the school must proceed regarding the challenged practices.

The *New York Times* [reported](#) that a forensic expert hired by the family of Everett Palmer, a 41-year-old father who died in solitary last year in York County Jail in Pennsylvania, has determined Palmer's death to be a homicide. This conclusion counters the York County Coroners Office statement that the cause of death was undetermined. Palmer had brought himself to the jail apparently in hopes of

resolving an outstanding warrant but ended up arrested and placed in a suicide watch cell. There, Palmer banged his head until it bled on the door, after which guards tasered him, placed a hood on him, and restrained him. While video footage of this incident exists, the family has been denied access to the video. Some of Palmers organs have not yet been returned to the family, but the autopsy showed bruises all around Palmers neck. While the county says Palmers death is an ongoing investigation, Palmers mother says, I think he was murdered.

The *Sacramento Bee* [reported](#) that Sacramento County agreed to the settlement of a civil rights lawsuit, claiming the countys two jails impose dangerous, inhumane and degrading conditions and use harsh, prolonged, and undue isolation. One plaintiff spent about eight years in solitary confinement, which caused him severe psychological effects, including auditory hallucinations and suicidal thoughts. The county did not admit fault but agreed to implement mental health screenings, enforce compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, enhance staff training, improve medical and mental health care, and examine measures to reduce the jail population of people with serious mental illness. The county has allocated \$21.7 million for upgrades to resolve conditions of confinement concerns.

U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar made a [speech](#) last week on the House floor during a discussion of an appropriation bill for the Justice Department, declaring solitary confinement torture and calling for an end to the use of solitary in U.S. prisons. Quoting from a recent [article](#) published by Solitary Watch, in partnership with Truthout, Omar said, For people with mental health issues, landing in solitary not only produces behaviors that yield more time in solitary, it can also extend prison sentences, sometimes drastically. For these already vulnerable people, solitary confinement generates a cycle of punishment that for some can literally be endless. Omar continued on to explain that people with psychiatric disabilities facing sentences of a couple of years can rack up so much extra time through this harmful cycle that they end up spending the rest of their lives in prison, or in and out of prison.

[According](#) to *The Intercept*, senator and presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren contacted Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) director Mark Morgan in a letter last week, condemning the agencys use of solitary confinement as a cruel and unnecessary solution for detainees who have mental or physical disabilities, are disabled, have been victims of sexual assault or torture, or otherwise may be especially vulnerable and in need of protection. Citing information released by Department of Homeland Security (DHS) whistleblower Ellen Gallagher and investigations conducted by DHS and *The Intercept*, Warren demanded information from ICE about how many people have been held in solitary since 2016, how many isolated people have a special vulnerability, how many people have died while isolated in ICE custody, and any steps taken to comply with the DHS report recommendations.

The *New York Daily News* [reported](#) that U.S. District Judge Brenda Sannes has issued an injunction ordering a 17-year-old by the name of E.L. to be taken out of solitary confinement in an upstate New York prison, saying that the isolation has caused E.L. irreparable harm. The Adolescent Offender Segregation Unit kept E.L., who has been diagnosed with mental illness, isolated at one point for 24 hours a day for ten days straight. Staff allegedly put E.L. on water deprivation orders, so that he could only access water for fifteen minutes every four or eight hours. He was no longer himself, his mother said after visiting him and hearing about the hallucinations and disorientation he experienced. On the wall of his cell, E.L. wrote, I need a doctor. Help me.

The *Mountain Eagle* [reported](#) that the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) has rejected the proposal to construct what would have been the most expensive correctional facility in the country, a \$510 million federal prison in Letcher County, Kentucky. A [lawsuit](#) filed by Green Justice, the Abolitionist Law Center, and Friends of Lilley Cornett Woods and North Fork River Watershed brought attention to the fact that the prison would have been built atop a former coal mine and next to an active one. Executive Director of the Abolitionist Law Center Dustin McDaniel said, We hope the BOPs action ends this prison project permanently, and that it also signifies a turning point nationally, away from investing money in prison construction, and toward increased investment in communities devastated by mass incarceration. The Trump administration proposed the funds be allocated for immigration detention centers instead, but this re-appropriation would need to be approved by the legislature.

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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