

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/addressing-the-overuse-of-segregation-in-u-s-prisons-and-jails/non-traditional-allies-reforming-restrictive-housing-in-utah>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When it comes to restrictive housing (also known as solitary confinement and segregation) there is undeniable evidence of its damaging effects, but no evidence that the practice actually makes prisons safer. So, it is no surprise that support for greater safety inside prisons comes from both inside and outside the world of corrections. In the case of restrictive housing reform in Utah, what *is* surprising is that traditional adversaries like the Utah Department of Corrections (UDC) [one of five corrections agencies](#) partnering with Vera on the [Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative](#) along with Utah's Disability Law Center (DLC), and the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah (ACLU), now find themselves working together as allies in partnership to help implement safe alternatives to segregation in Utah prisons.

Recently, Vera's Safe Alternatives to Segregation Initiative (SAS) team surveyed Rollin Cook, Director of UDC, Aaron Kinikini, DLC Legal Director, and Anna Thomas (formerly of Utah's ACLU) about the evolution of this unique alliance in Utah. Their responses provide valuable insight into how other corrections systems can develop and expand collaborative partnerships with local advocacy groups and other external stakeholders.

Question: *What were some of your organizations early apprehensions about partnering with an institution that had traditionally been considered an adversary?*

Rollin Cook: Personally, I didn't have any reservations. However, our leadership was a bit apprehensive, and that is mostly from [a series of factors]: the unknown, past conflict, litigation, and years of taking an adversarial position against each other.

Aaron Kinikini: In addition to the usual, predictable bias, and natural suspicions that civil rights lawyers and advocates tend to have when dealing with corrections people, we (DLC) had some very recent, negative experiences with the previous UDC administration [that] left a bad taste in our mouths. [Then], the department had a leadership change.

Q: *How has the relationship between the UDC, ACLU, and DLC been effective in fostering change to restrictive housing policies and practices?*

RC: We have these groups review our changes and provide insight into some of the concerns they have. People also are more likely to support something that they help create, so including them in the process builds buy-in, and, maybe even more importantly, a transparent knowledge of our operations.

AK: As an attorney or advocate responsible for protecting incarcerated people from civil rights abuses, the value of having an open channel to UDC leadership cannot be overstated. Earlier this year, I was made aware of an emergent, possibly life-threatening medical situation involving an incarcerated individual. I immediately reached out to UDC leadership and received an almost instantaneous response acknowledging the situation and confirming that steps would be taken to look into and resolve it. That is a valuable, sometimes life-saving benefit that incarcerated folks in Utah enjoy because of the relationship we have with UDC. More importantly, UDC is continuing to revamp its restrictive housing policies and the DLC and ACLU were included in that process. I'm confident that any concerns we as advocates bring to UDC's attention will be taken seriously and thoughtfully resolved.

Anna Thomas: You can never really tell what is really going on in a facility or why someone ends up in solitary. I think one concrete thing is that UDC was open to reviewing their policies with outside organizations [like ours]. Over time, we have come to trust UDC to acknowledge when a particular person or incident is an actual security risk versus an overstatement of a threat.

Q: *How do the UDC, ACLU, and DLC work together to improve the well-being of staff including staff who work in restrictive housing?*

RC: On multiple occasions, the ACLU and DLC has testified in our legislative sessions on behalf of our Correctional Officers regarding pay, benefits, working conditions, and environment.

AK: On the advocacy side, we need to acknowledge that working on the front lines of a prison is one of the hardest, most dangerous, and psychologically-taxing jobs in government.

AT: We recognize that horrible problems for inmates also make for horrible problems for correctional officers.

Q: *How does the relationship between the UDC, ACLU, and DLC benefit incarcerated people and their families?*

RC: The relationships provide a proactive problem-solving approach to challenging issues and are far more cost- and operationally-effective than attempting to handle everything in the courts, where things can become bogged down.

AT: As a civil liberties organization, our job is to believe the stories families tell us about prison conditions and complaints and bring them to the forefront. We used families stories to provide feedback to UDC so that what [UDC] said theyd do in response to a complaint, was actually done.

Q: *What strategies would you recommend for establishing and maintaining a good relationship between corrections agencies and local and national advocacy groups?*

RC: You have to be courageous and be willing to look at things with an open mind regarding your operations and relationships. Include these partners in review of your policies, procedures, and projects. The rewards far outweigh the awkwardness of the first few meetings.

AK: Personal relationships matter. Trust between traditionally-adversarial entities can really only be built person-to-person. Those in leadership positions should be willing to have open conversations and leave defensiveness and bias at the door. In the end, a fruitful relationship requires the belief that were all on the same side.

AT: Going where the people are. Supporting grassroots efforts and encouraging relationships with advocacy groups without telling them how to do their jobs.

With Executive Director Cooks upcoming departure in May, it is now more important than ever to ensure that this partnership between UDC and Utahs external stakeholders such as the ACLU and DLC, remains strong.

We sincerely thank Rollin Cook for five years of dynamic, forward-thinking leadership at the UDC. Rollin presided over an unprecedented period of transparency, cooperation, and productive engagement, and is leaving Utah's prison system in a vastly better state than he found it. As we look forward to continuing our partnership with UDC, we are hopeful that the incoming Director will embrace the ideals and maintain the momentum that Rollin has tirelessly advanced during his tenure."

Aaron Kinikini, DLC

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.