

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2020/07/28/voices-from-solitary-what-starts-in-adx-stays-in-adx/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | July 28, 2020

The following piece was written by Safi Donat, who is serving a 25-year sentence and is currently housed in the Control Unit at the United States Penitentiary, Administrative Maximum Facility (ADX) in Florence, Colorado. Donat, a 57-year-old from Inglewood, California, has been incarcerated for 21 years and has spent over a decade in solitary confinement.

People living in ADX face some of the most severe restrictions on their movement and communication of anyone in the country. According to Donat, even mail is regularly examined and returned. He asserts that Special Investigative Service (SIS) at ADX scrutinizes the mail for illegal activity, gang activity, etc. However, it can also be used to stifle freedom of speech, freedom of criticism, and freedom of information. In addition, while the viral footage of George Floyd's death sparked national outrage, the public is cut off from accessing most footage of incidents occurring in correctional facilities. Especially in a prison as restrictive as ADX, brutality against incarcerated people often goes unseen.

In a follow-up letter to Solitary Watch, Donat described a rare case in the 1990s when a group of correctional officers, labeled the Cowboys, working in the Special Housing Unit (SHU) at the U.S. Penitentiary Florence prison in the same complex as ADX were exposed for conspiring to systematically beat and brutalize select incarcerated people. According to a Westword [article](#) in 2003, the group of officers were indicted in response to 55 incidents of beating, torture, intimidation, deception, and threats, after the FBI and Department of Justice conducted a five-year investigation. During the trial, one officer in the group, David Armstrong, testified that the Cowboys had covered up the conspiracy by fabricating evidence of assaults on the officers to provide justification for the brutal beatings. In one case, an officer shaved a toothbrush and stabbed himself, according to Armstrong, before flicking blood into William Turner's SHU cell and taking pictures of both his arm and the blood. After the Turner was beaten, according to court documents, he could hardly stand or defecate without assistance. The officers involved were all acquitted in the case.

The alleged mantra of the Cowboys was, What starts in the SHU stays in the SHU, acknowledging that the isolation found in supermax prisons and solitary confinement is especially conducive to hiding the truth. Donat claims that these abuses were occurring years before the Cowboys were exposed and have continued long after. While not all officers engage in brutality against incarcerated people, he says, the dirty officers who do rarely, if ever, face accountability for their actions.

Below are portions of two letters from Donat, describing the response of the ADX administration to the COVID-19 pandemic and the imposition of a two-week long [Bureau of Prison \(BOP\)-wide lockdown](#), following the eruption of protests nationwide against police brutality. Donat included a [memo](#) from the ADX warden, informing all incarcerated people at the prison of the nationwide federal lockdown. Valerie Kieba

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April 8, 2020

Today, April 8, 2020, our first case of coronavirus hit ADX Florence, Co. Supermax on the Range Right below me (C-Range lower). He supposedly came from an FCC [Federal Correctional Complex] in Chicago.

As far as the virus is concerned, I've been wearing a bandanna over my nose and mouth since the first week of the announcement of the virus. The staff (guards) working on the range were joking about the virus (not all) and considered my attitude and actions as over-reactionary. The guards laughed when I would wear my bandanna over my nose and mouth being escorted to recreation.

Even the inmates took it as a joke, and now they are all worried that the virus is right below us. And as always, the inmates didn't take it seriously until the director of corrections ordered that masks be passed out to the inmates. And, as inmates do, they must be told to protect themselves instead of staying ahead of the curve and taking the initiative to protect themselves.

The guards still are not required to wear protective gear (e.g. face mask, protective clothing, etc) It's still their choice, whereas prisoners are required through mandate to stand six feet from the bars while staff are passing out food trays yet the staff are still applying the same

handcuffs to the wrists of inmates, one inmate after another, during escorts to and from appointments that are crucial (medical etc..) This is a conundrum that is unavoidable and something that I would not consider the guards fault.

However, the warden has not mandated that soap be passed out to indigent prisoners who have no money to buy soap. The last warden banned passing out soap to indigent inmates and instead pass out shampoo for indigent inmates to keep their bodies and hands clean that only last for one usage. However, this warden has not re-implemented passing out soap, just to save the BOP a few dollars, instead of saving a few lives.

The very *first* thing this warden should have done was re-implemented the passing out of soap not only to protect prisons, but staff as well. But since the warden has not made it mandatory for staff to wear masks, this virus could very well spell disaster for ADX inmates and staff. Taking the temperature of staff is one solution to help prevent the spread. However, since the virus can incubate itself for two weeks in your system before you show any symptoms, it should be mandatory that *all* staff wear face masks at all times while serving inmates food, or escorting inmates to and from their cells.

However, the director of corrections (whom I know very well, and I deem as a very capable, compassionate, and deserving leader of BOP) has made some very considerate moves to alleviate the fears of BOP prisoners. He has made all phone calls completely free for prisoners to call their families, extended the time per phone call, and given all prisoners 4 phone calls a month at ADX instead of one per month. The warden has also implemented this too and it has been carried out by all staff working in this unit (B-Unit control unit) for which I am grateful, and other prisoners too, but who dare not admit when the warden and staff do something right and good, because it will make the prisoner look like hes siding with the staff.

This writer is completely grateful, however, and thankful to the warden, the staff and the director for allowing us to check on our familys well being and alleviating my personal fears for my familys safety. Sure, its not a perfect system, and it never will be. But attitude is just as crucial for winning against this scourge (COVID-19) as the implementation of safety factors that we can control.

No one had to tell me to take safety precautions after the first CDC guidelines were recommended. I took action to protect myself, and so far, its paid off. And to the heroes of this virus (doctors, nurses, medical personnel) they have shown true courage and sacrificed their lives, their safety, their health and their family time to help millions of strangers overcome this pandemic and it should never be forgotten. And to you all, I salute you! Youre all heroes in my book, and have the hearts of a lion!

We will beat this, after all, life has continued on since the beginning of life and it will endure. But there will be casualties and I give all my blessings to you all to be safe and take nothing for granted as Ive learned being locked up 22 years, and in solitary confinement since 2009 where I cannot escape this virus.

June 6, 2020

Today, June 6, 2020, we were told about 6 AM that there would be no movement within the whole institution or no phone calls. At approximately 10:30 AM, all of the cable news networks (MSNBC, FOX, CNN, and C-SPAN) were taken off of the TV permanently and replaced with the Travel Channel, WGN Food Network and USA channels. (The ban did not block local news networks). In effect, the prison administration has literally attempted to censor us by not allowing criticism of how ADX has handled the Covid-19 pandemic, and has censored all the news stations to avoid us from watching the reports of George Floyds protests.

In addition, the administration has blocked our phone calls going out today. Stopping phone calls, censoring news stations (cable news) and locking down Florence ADX (which is already a max lockdown facility) is the prisons way of stopping prisoners from contacting their families and friends and to alleviate communication with organizations such as [Minutes Before Six](#) and Solitary Watch.

In the following [memorandum](#) Im enclosing, Complex Warden B. True cites the peaceful protests [that] have turned into violently charged demonstrations, referring to the nationwide protests against the death of George Floyd, as the reason for the federal lockdown. The memo does not cite any violent incident in any federal prison nor does it provide justification for taking away all the cable news stations and our phone calls.

These restrictive policies, in my opinion, incite violence by limiting all contact with our families, society, friends, attorneys, and social organizations. These restrictions represent a Trump-esque authoritarian attitude by suspending visits, attorney visits, censoring mail, censoring news stations off the television, stopping all phone calls, and intimidating the 99% of the population who are already locked down.

Up to this point, the prisons administration has not mentioned anything pertaining to violence against staff or inmates based on the death of George Floyd or of the protests. The warden says in the memo that the lockdown is not punitive. However, ADX is already a 23 and 1 lockdown facility, but our phone calls to our families, friends, attorneys, have been suspended, so how can one view it except as a punitive measure?

Banner photo: Susan Greene, Colorado Independent

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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This story sickens me. All I see here is an evil system that does what it wants and guards who get away with brutality. The guards are just horrible. Solitary is wrong. It drives people crazy. But maybe that's their intent.

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