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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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Our Weekly Roundup of News and Views on Solitary Confinement

by [Valerie Kiebal](#) | May 13, 2019

The Raleigh *News & Observer* [reported](#) that 32-year-old Jordan Jedlica died last week from low sodium levels, after he was found unresponsive in a solitary confinement cell at Warren Correctional Institution in North Carolina. His family says he had no history of medical problems and the doctor told them severely low sodium levels would cause a painful headache. Jedlica's mother spoke with her son a week before his death, when he told her that he might be moved to solitary for twenty days but did not say why. Jedlica's brother said, If they had found him in time and done something, he would still be alive. This should never have happened.

The *Miami Herald* [reported](#) that Tammy Jackson, a 34-year-old woman with significant psychiatric disabilities, gave birth in an isolated cell last month at the Broward County jail in Florida, despite Jackson informing staff of her contractions nearly seven hours earlier. Jackson's lawyer says at 3 a.m., when she asked for help, instead of sending Jackson to a hospital, staff attempted to reach an on-call physician who did not arrive until after 10 a.m., when Jackson gave birth alone. Jackson's lawyer and another public defender wrote a letter to Sheriff Gregory Tony calling for an immediate investigation of the medical care and use of solitary at the jail, and calling it unconscionable that a woman, particularly a mentally ill woman, would be abandoned in her cell to deliver her own baby.

Truthout [reported](#) that, in a torturous policy referred to as bucket detail or shitting in a bucket, officials at Limestone Correctional Facility in Alabama leave shackled men in a cell and refuse to remove the restraints until they have shat six times in a bucket. Lockup, or the administrative segregation unit, is so crowded, that ADOC [Alabama Department of Corrections] started putting men in closets with the bucket for several days, according to a mother whose son is held at Limestone. Kenneth Traywick, an incarcerated organizer with Unheard Voices, reported being placed in solitary confinement for speaking out against the bucket detail and other conditions of cruel and unusual punishment. A Department of Justice report last month found that conditions in Alabama prisons do, in fact, violate the 8th Amendment.

The [ACLU](#) of Virginia filed a class action lawsuit last week against the Virginia Department of Corrections (VDOC), claiming that the Segregation Reduction Step-Down Program at the state supermax prisons Red Onion and Wallens Ridge continues to isolate people. The lawsuit likens the so-called step down program to the former Phase Program, which had the stated purpose of transitioning people out of solitary. The VDOC shut down the Phase Program in 1985, however, after an ACLU lawsuit found its arbitrary, indefinite placement of people in solitary unconstitutional. Now, despite VDOC claims that their prisons do not use solitary, the ACLU says, An endless maze of classifications, vague and confusing processes, and highly subjective decision-making authority granted to VDOC staff effectively make it impossible for many people to be released from solitary, ever. Solitary Watch first wrote about the false claims of VDOC's step-down program in a [2016 investigation](#).

U.S. District Court Judge Colleen McMahon ruled that a lawsuit could proceed on behalf of four young men who claim they faced solitary and a routine of torture at the Albany County Jail in New York. [According](#) to the *New York Daily News*, the youth were transferred from Rikers Island to Albany County in an alleged evasion of New York City's ban on solitary for people under 22. One plaintiff, Steven Espinal, recalled being transferred after he was accused of assaulting a guard when he was eighteen years old. The lawsuit says Espinal was physically beaten, tased, and sexually assaulted upon his arrival at the Albany jail, so brutally that he needed a catheter. The lieutenant allegedly told him, This isn't Rikers. This is Albany County. We do what we want. Espinal spent about a year in solitary. Judge McMahon wrote in her decision, Barbarity of the sort alleged cannot be tolerated in a civilized society.

The Auburn *Citizen* [reported](#) that 43-year-old West Spruill, serving life without parole at Auburn Correctional Facility in upstate New York, has been on hunger strike since April 8. Spruill said he is being held in solitary confinement without running water or personal property and suffers from bipolar disorder and severe depression. He said, I'm living under inhumane conditions. I don't feel like eating, I feel suicidal. After the state threatened to force-feed him, Spruill's lawyer called for his client to be transferred to a hospital to receive treatment there instead of at the prison, which Spruill recalled previous force-feedings being very, very painful very inhumane. Spruill told the court that when he had refused to be restrained to be force fed he was sprayed with a chemical agent by prison staff, making it so he couldn't breathe or see. Then, he was wrestled to the ground, restrained, and had a tube put down his nose. Cayuga County Judge Thomas Leone said he would not let an incarcerated man pick the level of care, and ruled in favor of the state, giving it permission to force-feed Spruill at the prison.

[According](#) to the *Montgomery Advertiser*, U.S. District Court Judge Myron Thompson issued a ruling to appoint an interim external monitor to oversee the enforcement of suicide prevention and solitary confinement reforms in the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC), because he said prison officials have failed to enforce their own policies and court ordered changes. Over a recent fifteen-month period, fifteen incarcerated men have committed suicide in the custody of the ADOC. Thompson found that severe understaffing has contributed to the prolonged violations, and he concluded the ADOC continues to act with deliberate indifference and continues to hold people with severe mental illnesses in solitary confinement without supervision.

The *East Bay Express* published an [article](#) detailing incidents of medical neglect, isolation, inadequate mental health care, use of force, and physical assault at Alameda County's Santa Rita Jail. A series of lawsuits have been filed against the county for the conditions in the jail, including one on behalf of Candace Steel, who claims she was forced to give birth alone in isolation in 2017. Another lawsuit claims the jail isolates people with psychiatric disabilities and fails to implement effective suicide prevention protocols. Though Sheriff Gregory Ahern called Santa Rita the best big jail in the nation, the county paid out \$15.5 million in settlements between 2013 and 2017, and has continued to pay millions in settlements since then. At least 35 people have died in the custody of the jail since 2014.

The Associated Press [reported](#) that a coalition of faith leaders have come together in support of the Humane Alternatives to Long Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act, which would ban solitary confinement beyond fifteen consecutive days in New York's prison and jails and replace it with more humane options. The state Council of Churches, the New York State Catholic Conference, the Labor-Religion Coalition of New York State, and other Christian, Muslim, and Jewish organizations have endorsed the HALT Act, currently pending in the state legislature.

[According](#) to *Weedmaps News*, the consumption of marijuana commonly results in solitary confinement in U.S. prisons despite being a minor, nonviolent rule violation. Johnny Perez, Director of the U.S. Prisons Program for the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, recalled the three times he faced solitary confinement, one of which lasted ten months, for cannabis use. Perez suggested that players in the newly legalized medical and recreational marijuana industry should get involved in the movement against solitary confinement, as well as against the criminalization of cannabis. I think that owners of dispensaries and leaders in the field have a responsibility to say, I'm glad we got here, but let's not forget how many people and loved ones and members of families have been punished for years, he said. Entire communities have been negatively impacted.

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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