

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Lizzie Kane](#) | January 28, 2021

The [Richmond Times-Dispatch reported](#) that the ACLU of Virginia reached a settlement with the Virginia Department of Corrections in a lawsuit filed on behalf of Nicolas Reyes. Reyes, an incarcerated man with mental illness, allegedly was held in solitary confinement for more than a dozen years because he does not speak English. Per the agreement, Reyes will receive mental health treatment and monetary compensation, and has been moved from Red Onion State Prison to a special housing unit in Wallens Ridge State Prison. The DOC will also establish a system-wide policy providing access to interpreters and translation services for inmates who require them. Reyes could not gain access to the Step Down Program way for incarcerated individuals to earn their way toward less restrictive housing through work and programming because he did not have a translator. The Virginia DOC has denied that Reyes was held in solitary confinement for more than 12 years.

Christopher Blackwell, incarcerated at Washington State Reformatory, [wrote in the HuffPost](#) that living conditions are inhumane and there is a devastating outbreak of COVID-19 at the prison. Individuals in the general population are confined to their cells for around 23 hours a day because of the outbreak, according to Blackwell. He said that so many prisoners were removed from the unit that they've actually been doubled up in solitary cells with two sick prisoners in cells designed for only one person. One person gets the concrete block cot and the other gets to sleep on the floor next to the toilet. The Washington Department of Corrections said that the cells are designed for two individuals and maintained that they have followed all protocols, even though Blackwell said otherwise; Governor Jay Inslee stated that he trusts the DOC.

The [Journal Inquirer reported](#) that advocates are calling for the closing of Northern Correctional Institution in Somers, Connecticut. Northern is a supermax prison, the type of facility where most people are held in solitary confinement, and a representative of the Stop Solitary CT campaign called conditions there torture. A state senator said that when he visited a decade ago, a correctional officer told him the system was a marvel of engineering due to its ability to break people. Advocates want the money saved from closing the facility to go to the needs of ex-inmates and those at risk of imprisonment instead. The state's Correction Department said it is planning to close a facility after the pandemic.

Jonathan Sacks, the director of the Michigan State Appellate Defender Office, wrote an [op-ed in the Detroit News](#) arguing that conditions in Michigan prisons during COVID-19 pandemic constitute a humanitarian crisis. He included a statement from an incarcerated individual begging for help, and he discussed how improving conditions for incarcerated people will directly benefit the rest of us because prison staff are also spreading the virus to their communities. Sacks outlined four steps for the state to take: the prioritization of vaccinations for incarcerated people, the examination of the Michigan Department of Corrections response to the pandemic, the establishment of free methods of communication with loved ones for incarcerated people in all facilities, and the increase of parole releases.

[The 19th reported](#) that four months after New York City's self-imposed deadline to end solitary confinement, it remains in use. The promise was made after Layleen Extravaganza Cubilette-Polanco died in solitary confinement on Rikers Island in 2019. She had been placed in isolation despite having mental health issues and a known seizure disorder, and video footage showed that corrections officers failed to check on her as demanded by jail protocols. A working group was supposed to produce a public plan by September 2020 to end solitary confinement in all New York City jails and present it to the Board of Corrections (BOC), which oversees the jails, and in November, the New York City Council introduced a bill banning solitary, yet the practice still persists. A statement from the Board of Corrections said that it is in the process of making changes.

[WBUR News published](#) an article about the continued negotiations between Massachusetts corrections officials and the U.S. Department of Justice after last year's scathing federal report on mental health treatment in the state's prisons. The report found that the state Department of Correction violated prisoners' constitutional rights by not providing adequate mental health care, specifically incarcerated individuals on mental health watch, which is akin to solitary confinement. The state's Restrictive Housing Oversight Committee made several public recommendations during its meeting this week. Several members of the public expressed frustration at the pace of change, citing how the pandemic has exacerbated the problems in the state's prison system.

Lizzie Kane was an intern for Solitary Watch in the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021. Her work has also appeared in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Dallas Morning News, and Charlotte Observer.

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 [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 19, 2022

by [Mirilla Zhu](#)

October 12, 2022

by [Caitlin Konya](#)

October 5, 2022

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