

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2015/01/20/civil-and-human-rights-groups-to-eric-holder-no-new-federal-supermax-prison-at-thomson/>

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by [Jean Casella](#) | January 20, 2015

Last week, Solitary Watch [published an investigation](#) into the new federal prison in Thomson, Illinois, which is in the process of being renovated with an eye toward activation in the next year. Sources show that Thomson is intended to be in effect a supermax prison, with 400 Administrative Maximum cells for extreme solitary confinement, and 1500 more Special Management Unit cells, where people will be held in 23-hour-a-day lockdown. If activated as planned

On Friday, January 16, a group of advocates representing a broad coalition of civil rights advocates, faith community leaders, human rights organizations, mental health practitioners, academics, lawyers, and former prisoners sent a letter to U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, who oversees the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). The letter expresses concern over the Bureau's imminent plans to increase its use of solitary and other forms of isolated confinement with the opening of the new Thomson Correctional Center in Illinois.

The letter continues: The creation of more solitary confinement beds at this time simply makes no sense as BOP is also claiming that it has reduced and will continue to reduce the use of isolation in the federal system. This stark contradiction raises serious questions about the Bureau's efficient use of scarce taxpayer dollars and its disregard of the need for humane policies and practices that foster rehabilitation of prisoners and better public safety outcomes.

The more than 30 signatories to the letter range from the ACLU and Amnesty International to the National Religious Campaign Against Torture and a host of other faith-based groups. They urge Holder and the Department of Justice to delay any plans regarding Thomson's use until the completion of a year-long [audit](#) of the use of segregation, solitary confinement and other forms of extreme isolation across the BOP. The purpose of the audit is widely believed to be some reduction in the use of solitary confinement in the federal system.

The letter points out: The creation of more solitary confinement beds at this time simply makes no sense as BOP is also claiming that it has reduced and will continue to reduce the use of isolation in the federal system. This stark contradiction raises serious questions about the Bureau's efficient use of scarce taxpayer dollars and its disregard of the need for humane policies and practices that foster rehabilitation of prisoners and better public safety outcomes.

The groups do not express general opposition to Thomson Correctional Facility, which the federal government purchased from the state of Illinois in 2012, but rather to its opening as a supermax prison. In fact, Solitary Watch's investigation suggests that the prison will need considerable retrofitting in order to convert it from a conventional maximum security prison, with congregate spaces such as mess halls and day rooms, into a supermax facility.

We are deeply concerned that BOP's decision to convert Thomson Correctional Center into another supermax prison not only constitutes an example of extreme government waste of scarce taxpayer dollars, but that the Bureau is willfully implementing policies and practices which will cause harm to and potentially violate the rights of thousands of prisoners with negative public safety outcomes for us all, the letter concludes. As Attorney General, we call on you to ensure that the BOP is operated in a humane, safe, efficient, and effective manner. Expanding the use of solitary and other forms of isolation in federal prisons accomplishes none of these goals.

To read the full text of the letter, click below. To date, there has been no response from Attorney General Holder's office.

January 18, 2023

The Honorable Eric B. Holder, Jr.
United States Attorney General
U. S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530-8000

Dear Attorney General Holder:

Our diverse organizations represent a broad coalition of civil rights advocates, faith community leaders, human rights organizations, mental health practitioners, academics, lawyers, and former prisoners all concerned about the overuse of solitary confinement in the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), as well as the Bureau's intention plans to increase its use of solitary and other forms of isolated confinement with the opening of the new Thomson Correctional Center in Illinois. The creation of more solitary confinement beds at this time simply makes no sense as BOP is also claiming that it has reduced and will continue to reduce the use of isolation in the federal system. This such consultation raises serious questions about the Bureau's efficient use of scarce taxpayer dollars and its disregard of the need for humane policies and practices that foster rehabilitation of prisoners and better public safety outcomes.

We write to ask the Department of Justice (DOJ) to delay a final decision about BOP's expansion of such isolated confinement units until the upcoming findings and recommendations of the outside audit team contracted to review BOP's use of solitary confinement are carefully considered by your department. Moreover, we seek a commitment from DOJ to reduce BOP's use of solitary and other forms of isolated confinement now and in the future.

BOP plans to significantly expand its capacity to house prisoners in conditions of extreme isolation in the Thomson facility, which has a reported 1,000 cells. Due to the fact of current trends across the country where states as diverse as Texas, Maine, Massachusetts, Colorado, New York, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Arizona among others are taking steps to reduce reliance on solitary confinement due to the numerous human, fiscal, and public safety costs of the practice, BOP's actions are also contrary to the work of DOJ's Civil Rights Division in reducing the use of solitary in state and local facilities, especially for individuals with mental illness and cognitive impairments, and your own statements regarding the need to eliminate the use of solitary on incarcerated youth.

BOP's expansion of solitary and other forms of isolated confinement is directly contradicted not only by good correctional practice, but by Director Samuels' testimony that the federal system is in fact reducing its use of such housing and is responding to an independent audit of the Bureau's use of isolation.²² At this time, that audit is still pending and the findings have yet to be made public.

Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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 [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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