

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2015/11/24/shakeup-in-alaska-prisons-targets-overuse-of-solitary-confinement/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

Reports Find Widespread Isolation and Neglect; Corrections Chief Resigns

by [Garrett Zehr](#) | November 24, 2015

Alaskas prison system is broken according to Governor Bill Walker following a damning review of the Department of Corrections, including its overuse of solitary confinement and a recommendation for the practice to be used sparingly and appropriately.

The review was ordered by Walker in August following highly-publicized outcry about a string of deaths of individuals in custody.

The system is broken in many ways and needs new leadership, [said Walker](#), who announced the resignation of Corrections Commissioner Ronald Taylor.

The [report](#) found widespread failings in the system, including flawed investigations of individuals who died by suicide, lax consequences for employee misconduct, and medically vulnerable individuals being held in [non-criminal protective custody](#).

In its evaluation of solitary confinement, the review found an example of four 17-year-old individuals who have been held in solitary for approximately 11 months. They are not receiving educational services and the time outside of their solitary cells involves times spent in a hallway and a rare visit outside the building in a cage-like area.

The review took note of international restrictions on solitary for youth as well as the costs associated with solitary and the existence of a number of ongoing reviews of solitary around the United States.

Solitary confinement is a blunt tool, the report says. Many states along with the federal government are reviewing their segregation policies and practices. Negative psychological impacts are well documented. The Review Team received many comments and concerns from the public about this issue; many said their loved ones devolved under the weight of isolation.

The review comes alongside a [recent investigation](#) by Alaskas ombudsperson about an individual who was held in solitary for two years without ever being told the reason. The man had no history of violence and was held in solitary at the Anchorage Correctional Complex for 657 days. He was held based solely on a request from the U.S. Marshals Service as he was awaiting trial on federal charges and then while he waited for transfer to the Federal Bureau of Prisons after his sentencing.

The investigation by Ombudsman Linda Lord-Jenkins concluded that while a required administrative segregation hearing was held each month, these hearings were simply a formality. The individual was never informed of the evidence used to hold him in segregation at the request of the U.S. Marshals and the Department of Corrections never made an independent finding that the individual was a risk to the general population and should therefore be held in solitary.

The ombudsperson concluded that the complaint was justified because there is nothing in law, regulation or departmental policy that allows the Department to defer its decision-making responsibility to the U.S. Marshals Service or any other outside agency.

The ombudsperson recommended the Department immediately hold a classification hearing for the individual but the Department did not respond and the individual was subsequently transferred out of the custody of the Department. She then recommended that the Department immediately cease the practice of holding individuals in solitary solely on the request of the U.S. Marshals. She also recommended classification review hearings for anyone affected by the current practice. The department did not respond to those recommendations and the ombudsperson closed the filed by marking the complaint justified and not rectified.

Earlier this year, Lord-Jenkins also found a man was [wrongly disciplined](#) with two months of solitary because of faulty evidence handling and hearing records, for which she gave a harsh indictment of the behaviour and the Departments response.

The Ombudsman finds disturbing the Departments disregard and even lack of familiarity with its own laws governing prison discipline, and with the nonchalance with which the Department continues to regard decisions of both the state and federal supreme courts, Lord-Jenkins said, who was particularly critical of then Corrections Commissioner Taylor.

Following the release of the Corrections review, Governor Walker announced that Walt Monegan, the former Anchorage police chief and state commissioner for public safety, would replace Taylor and temporarily take over the oversight of the prison system during the search for a permanent replacement.

The new Commissioner will be responsible for reviewing and considering the eight recommendations of the Review, including the following recommendation on solitary:

Establish a clear priority to reduce solitary confinement and establish benchmarks of progress. State correctional systems and the federal prison system have established goals for reducing the use of solitary confinement. Many national agencies and resources exist that could help in this effort, and concerned members of the public have offered to help. Reducing solitary confinement is compatible with Alaska's goal of reducing recidivism. Inmates released directly from solitary confinement to the community are particularly at risk of poor adjustment.

Garrett Zehr is a Toronto-based legal aid lawyer practicing criminal defense and international human rights law, and a proud union member.

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News