

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/06/04/oregon-converts-supermax-unit-to-treat-mental-illness/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | June 4, 2010

A reader recently called our attention to an article that appeared back in April in the *Salem (Oregon) Statesman Journal*, titled [Oregon State Penitentiary Adapts to Mental Illness](#). According to the Oregon Department of Corrections, about half of the states 14,000 prisoners 6,797 are mentally ill. This is ten times greater than the population of the states primary psychiatric hospital, the 627-bed Oregon State Hospital in Salem which happens to be located just north of the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP) in Salem, the states only maximum security prison.

Now, the Department of Corrections has announced plans to convert the OSPs supermax unit, which is officially called the Intensive Management Unit, will be converted into what the *Statesman Journal* calls three therapy-minded units.

For two decades, the IMU has operated as a tightly controlled compound within the now-2,000-inmate prison. It corrals belligerent and disruptive inmates some mentally ill in their cells for more than 23 hours per day.

By the end of this year, the two-story IMU facility will get a facelift to soften its austere environment, and will begin serving a therapeutic role. Mental health services are planned for three of the four units in the IMU building:

The plan is far from perfect: Creating 187 new places in a system with 7,000 prisoners suffer from mental illness is a drop in the bucket, and its too soon to say how effective the mental health units will be. (In addition, the renovation calls for Oregon's death row to occupy one part of the former IMU.) But any provision for prisoners with mental illnesses especially one that replaces solitary confinement cells has to be viewed as progress.

The article provides a brief (and all too typical) history of how mentally ill prisoners have fared in Oregon's prisons. Its author, Alan Gustafson, investigated prison suicides most of which took place in the IMU back in 2007; his [extensive reporting on that subject](#) is well worth reading as well.

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James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. 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.

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September 29, 2022

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well done may the rest of us follow in steps and do the same i am glad that the state has done this i hope that they stick with this and do well for the inmates as a grate man said they may not care what they said hear but they dam well best what they did hear lol this is a step in the right way behold there is some wise ones in this nashion lol

Thank God, Now as Americans can begin to lift our heads up concerning this new act of compassion. It took long enough. How long has it taken since Mr. Ronald Reagan had other ideas for these people?

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