

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/addressing-the-overuse-of-segregation-in-u-s-prisons-and-jails/looking-to-norway-for-inspiration-on-reducing-the-use-of-solitary-confinement>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Three leaders from the Washington State Department of Corrections (WADOC) accompanied the Vera Institute of Justice in October 2019 on a study trip to two correctional facilities in Norway for inspiration on reducing the use of solitary confinement (also known as restrictive housing or segregation) in the state.

WADOC is shifting its mission [to improve public safety by positively changing the lives](#) of those it incarcerates. While the department is one of the most progressive of its kind in the nation, its leaders are constantly striving to improve.

To that end, last fall WADOC's Secretary Stephen Sinclair entered into [a new partnership](#) with Vera's [Safe Prisons, Safe Communities: From Isolation to Dignity and Wellness Behind Bars](#) initiative to continue the department's efforts to reduce the use of restrictive housing.

Vera is working with the department toward five goals: to reduce the number of people in restrictive housing by at least 50 percent over four years, significantly reduce the amount of time people spend there, transform conditions therein, eliminate its use for particularly vulnerable populations such as people with serious mental illnesses, and address racial and ethnic disparities in its use.

We know that this initiative will positively change the lives of those incarcerated in Washington, and it will improve the well-being of the correctional staff who work here and the environment they work in, WADOC Secretary Stephen Sinclair said. Ultimately, we'll see better outcomes for all.

Since 2011, WADOC has implemented a number of measures to reduce and reform restrictive housing, including providing group programming in classrooms for those in restrictive housing and creating a transition pod to help people transition safely back into the general population. In 2011, WADOC had more than 600 people in maximum custody (the system's most restrictive housing), but now that number is around 265.

Vera's work with WADOC is rooted in the belief that jails and prisons should separate people from the general population only as a last resort; only as a response to serious, violent behavior; for the shortest time possible; and with the least restrictive conditions safely possible.

Our goal now is to make sure people go into restrictive housing for the right circumstances and only as long as necessary, said Tim Thrasher, WADOC's Mission Housing Administrator. We are ensuring that before we assign someone to [restrictive housing], we are exhausting all other general population options.

Recognized as a leader in progressive incarceration, Norway's system is based on the idea that courts are for punishment and correctional facilities are for creating better neighbors. Correctional policies and practices center around respect for the human dignity of incarcerated people and staff. They focus primarily on rehabilitation, resocialization, and reentry.

It is a concept that is particularly relevant to Washington as WADOC embraces a new mission, vision, and values centered on improving public safety by positively changing lives. Given that the average length of sentence for people released from Washington's correctional facilities in the last year is just shy of two years, WADOC recognizes the importance of treating people with respect and preparing them for crime-free futures in their communities.

Trip participants had the opportunity to learn how Norwegian facilities manage incarcerated populations, respond to behavior, and address other challenges without the widespread or extensive use of restrictive housing as it exists in the United States.

The trip was one of several organized and funded by Vera to help correctional leaders and other decision makers stimulate ambitious prison reforms here in the United States by learning about and seeing firsthand the dramatically different approach to incarceration in Norway and other countries.

Now, WADOC is looking to turn the lessons learned in Norway into additional reforms, including new policies that safely narrow the reasons incarcerated people may be placed into restrictive housing and shorten the length of time they remain there, plus other changes to specifically address the needs of those with serious mental illnesses and neurocognitive disorders. WADOC is also planning to transform some restrictive housing units into other types of housing.

Jeri Boe, superintendent at Clallam Bay Corrections Center, says these changes are welcome. As an officer, I worked the majority of my time in the Intensive Management Unit (IMU), said Boe. Over the years, I have seen the positive impacts that have been made by the department regarding restrictive housing.

When I was an officer, it wasn't unusual for someone to spend upwards of a year in IMU, and I know what that can do to someone. I am very supportive of the changes we, as a department, are making, Boe said.

The [study trip](#) to Norway was part of the partnership between WADOC and Vera's [Safe Prisons, Safe Communities](#) initiative.

Janelle Guthrie is the communications director for the Washington State Department of Corrections. Cross-posted with WADOC at <https://www.doc.wa.gov/>.

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