

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2014/02/06/voices-solitary-hunger-strike-menard-prison/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | February 6, 2014



A little over a year ago, the notorious Tamms Correctional Center was closed, after a long battle by activists and with the support of Governor Pat Quinn. Individuals were rehoused in prisons across Illinois, including Menard Correctional Center, the largest maximum-security institution in the state. While few would argue that it is anything but an improvement over Tamms, according to some prison advocates and individuals on the inside, Menard has also long been beset by problems. This past June, Solitary Watch [featured a letter](#) from an individual housed in segregation at Menard. He describes what it is like to be double-celled in a space less than five feet wide.

On January 15, a group of individuals housed at the Administrative Detention unit at Menard went on hunger strike. The following is a letter from someone housed at the prison sent before the strike began, explaining the conditions that prompted the decision as well as the strikers' demands. Since we did not have explicit permission from the author to use his name, we are publishing it anonymously. Over the past few days Solitary Watch spoke to prison advocates in touch with individuals on the inside, and also viewed several letters received since the hunger strike began. According to these accounts, as of Monday, February 3, about 10 to 15 people are still refusing to eat.

The physical conditions on the inside have seemingly improved: guards have been cleaning the units and mental health staff are making rounds. However, the prison has so far still refused to provide written explanations for placement in solitary or publish a set of rules for stepping-down to general population. Several hunger strikers said they received bogus disciplinary tickets and one person was reportedly beaten. Guards have also allegedly threatened hunger strikers with physical violence if or when they require medical attention, which is of particular concern since there are no cameras in the infirmary at Menard.

Solitary Watch contacted the Illinois Department of Corrections to ask for a comment on the ongoing hunger strike. Director of Communications Tom Shaer said that there was reason to suspect that the hunger strikers were getting commissary food from others in the unit, based on what he said were normal or close to normal ketone levels and less weight loss than what is normally seen in actual hunger strikers. He contested the allegation that individuals placed in Administrative Detention do not know why, telling Solitary Watch, before being assigned to AD, every inmate has long since been interviewed about issues causing his placement and, thus, has a very good idea of the reasons. He said that the placement decisions and 90-day reviews contain confidential information, so issuing copies to prisoners could pose a security threat, and that AD reviews/decisions are not made by one person and that the initial AD decision goes all the way up to the Director of the IDOC.

Finally, Tom Shaer told Solitary Watch, we don't have Solitary Confinement in Illinois prisons. As evidence he presented, policy documents state that individuals in Administrative Detention have at least five hours of recreation outside of their cells per week and two showers per week, in addition to two non-contact visits and one 15-minute phone call per month; those in Segregation are supposed to receive the same, minus phone privileges. These conditions, 23-hour cell lockdowns, however, conform to the definitions of solitary confinement provided by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and most human rights and civil liberties groups.

Aviva Stahl

Update: After reading this post, Tom Shaer of the IDOC contested virtually all of the statements made in the following letter, saying that those in segregation have cleaning supplies; that their cells are not filthy, moldy, or cold; that they do have mental health assessments;

they receive mail in a timely manner; they have access to legal boxes; and theyand receive educational programming, though they sometimes must wait in line for it. The lettersauthor and other hunger strikers stand by their allegations. AS

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I am in a part of segregation in Illinois DOC, in Menard CC, that has been designated High Security Unit Administrative Detention. As I'm sure you know, Tamm's supermax was shut down by Governor Pat Quinn. As all systems of oppression have the nature of a chameleon, the prison crats forced adjustment since the closure of Tamm's has been to find new ways to do the same thing repression. The High Security Unit (HSU) is being called by officers mini-Tamms. Tamms isolation camp is being replaced via the establishing of multiple mini-Tamms as here at Menard & in several segunits in medium security prisons

The conditions here are inhumane & repressive. So much that we are forced to make a stand as men in righteous indignation. We in HSU have planned a hunger strike on the 15th of January. We have put together a list of demands in individual grievances with the hope that it would shield us from administrative revenge. Our complaints are all pursuant to our constitutional rights & human dignity. Such as implement uniform written policies that provide for constitutionally adequate notice of why an inmate is being placed in Administrative Detention at the HSU, & reasonable, periodic review in the form of annual informal hearings that allow me to refute the alleged reasons why my placement in AD is being continued. No one here has been given notice to why we're here.

Other issues concern the conditions we're forced to live in.

It is absolutely filthy here, we are provided no cleaning supplies to clean our own cells, no disinfectants, no toilet brushes, as of now all we're provided with is a small 2x3 sponge once a month, there are no written policies for the HSU that requires the daily sweeping & mopping of the wings, the showers are filthy & infested with mold, as of now the wing is never swept or mopped.

There is no mental health screening & evaluation of inmates prior to being placed in the HSU, there's no specially trained mental health staff assigned to identify the deterioration of an inmate's mental health due to long term isolation.

The mail, including legal mail, is not processed in a timely manner, as of right now, mail takes sometimes 3 weeks from the post mark to be delivered

There's no reasonable access to our legal boxes, as of now, access is limited to approximately once a month, this is unacceptable

There's no educational programming

The cells are cold more often than not, & we're not allowed to purchase cotton blankets off commissary (the state issued blanket is thin & inadequate)

The food is not only awful & an unauthorized deviation from the statewide menu, but low calorie intake has us losing weight

We're not issued our own individual coats, we have to share coats with numerous men that leaves a stink behind, some of us here are not even given coats at all.

These are some of the conditions we are forced to live under & have resolved to take a stand against thru peaceful protest. However, IDO officials will interpret our righteous indignation as an act of aggression & challenge to their authority. And Menard CC, which is in southern Illinois, is notorious for their spiteful retribution. Public awareness is our only shield from unjust abuse of authority, which is why we ask for your support of our peaceful protest against our conditions of confinement. The HSU is a new program & we know not the economic incentive or who stands to benefit the most, so we know they will bring the heat. We only ask that on January 15, 2014, that you & your friends call the Governor's office, the Director of IDOCS, A. Godinez, & the Warden of Menard CC, and inquire about our peaceful protest & our reasons & conditions of confinement.

Our conditions are inextricably linked to the social mobilization across the nation against the injustice of mass incarceration. We hope that we have your support & we thank you.

Very truly yours in struggle.

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 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.

I wish there could be solutions offered. One person here or there can get little done. Standing by myself in writing grievances is only causing conditions to get worse, in some cases. I can get no paper to write about what is happening in NC, and the politicians, the governor, the mayor where our case started, the supposed human rights people here all remain silent to my constant plea for justice. How do we help these men in isolation all over the country?

UNLESS one learns, understand legalese you are FUKED.

For instance person, Individual, corporation are synonyms.

NEVER TRUST an ATTORNEY, as each are STATE BAR UNION MEMBERS that willfully, purposefully violate the Taft Hartley Act.

Each is a TRAITOR & the Constitutions provide remedy.

Pick sides either you STAND w/ G-d AGAINST the EVILDOERS, WRONGDOERS or you support their fraud which vitiates the most solemn contracts, documents & judgments.

WOE TO THE ATTORNEY & their enablers.

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Solitary Watch

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