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New York City Board of Correction  
1 Centre Street, Room 2213  
New York, NY 10007

**RE: ELIMINATING SOLITARY CONFINEMENT**

Board of Correction:

It has come to my attention your agency is presently considering rules to limit or even eliminate the use of solitary confinement in New York City jails. Please accept my letter in support of eliminating the use of solitary confinement in all its forms.

From personal experience, solitary confinement exacts a double hardship upon incarcerated people. I have been imprisoned continuously for the past 27 years. Two of those years I spent in Southport, a State solitary confinement prison. I was also placed in solitary awaiting trial twice while imprisoned on Rikers Island in 1987 and 1993. I will speak of the latter first because from 1996 through 1998 (an extended period of years spent in solitary), this was by far the worst periods of 27 year imprisonment.

Misery permeated the very air in Southport Correctional Facility. Men would perform acts and indulge in behaviors which I had never before seen or experienced. Some men pounded cell walls non-stop throughout the night; others screamed and screeched as if being tortured. Men bit their wrists to the bone to sever their arteries; some would hurl urine and feces onto other incarcerated people as well as prison staff passing by. But most severe and troubling to everyone around us were the suicides. Even when a person died this way, none of us on the units were ever offered any form of counseling to determine how we were coping with the loss of life around us. In solitary we were seen and treated as animals. Indeed, it was the first time I was forced to accept the reality that I lived in a society in which dogs were offered more empathy than humans.

It was a mentally challenging two years where I suffered from an acute infection in my throat which would not heal. Antibiotics could not cure it and it was not until I was

released from solitary confinement that I recognize the stress solitary had placed not only on my mental health, but on my physical health as well.

My first experiences with solitary confinement on Rikers Island also exposed me to the subhuman treatment I would personally experience at the hands of prison guards and the need for oversight and cameras in these space or the elimination of the use of solitary confinement altogether. If oversight of solitary confinement spaces within a prison or jail is a problem today, one could only imagine the conditions which existed over 30 years ago.

For instance, in 1987 while I was in pretrial detention at GMDC on Rikers Island, I was sentenced to a 30-day solitary confinement punishment for a trivial matter. During this confinement period there was an attempt made on my life. About 1:00 AM while locked in a cell, several Rikers guards, at the behest of a well connected drug dealer in Queens, attempted to take my life. After a considerable struggle, they handcuffed me, placed a noose around my neck made with a torn bed sheet, and strung me up on the window leaving me to die of what would appear as a suicide. Indeed, it would not have seemed strange at that time (or any time) for someone in solitary to take their own life. Fortunately the bed sheet tore and I was found unconscious and foaming at the mouth on the floor an hour later by another guard who would periodically checked on me because he knew of previous attempts by other guards within the facility to harm me.

While I was fortunate to have survived the attack, and although my claims that guards tried to kill me were initially investigated after "DOC" lapels as well as an officer's "nametag" was found in the cell (which were ripped from their shirts during my struggle), to my knowledge after I fled Rikers two months later, no meaningful investigation was ever conducted into the attempts on my life while in solitary. In 1993, when I was again placed in solitary, I witnessed guards beating men on several occasions and nothing was ever done about.

Solitary confinement areas in prisons and jails also breed and allow the festering of brutal animosity in guards against incarcerated people in their charge. It is no longer a secret that solitary confinement areas allow atrocities to take place with little or no oversight. And, although I have no evidence that racism played a role in my Rikers experiences in solitary, it does have grave implications when guards who harbor race-based hate are able to exercise their prejudices without any repercussions. This is what oftentimes occurs in upstate prisons that had previously punished men in solitary with extreme deprivations including taking mattresses and forcing men to sleep on cold steel

bed frames or the floor; turning off the running water and forcing men to drink out of the toilet bowl; forcing men to eat a bland specially made loaf; and, the most horrifying is forcing them to take psychotropic drugs which create far worse human beings than those originally placed in solitary.

It is for these reasons and my own personal experiences that I strongly urge members of the Board of Correction to either eliminate the practice of solitary confinement and develop more humane and holistic methods to deal with "punishment" within jails. If eliminating solitary confinement spaces is not feasible, then the Board must develop and implement greater restrictions on the use of solitary confinement to the most severe cases where alternatives are clearly unavailable or impractical.

In addition, solitary confinement spaces must be closely monitored by security cameras wherein prison guards cannot have access to them. This will prevent abuse as well as assist prison officials with creating a safer environment.

Thank you for your time and it is my hope that revealing my experiences will aid in the Board's ultimate determination to either eliminate or restrict the use of solitary confinement.

Sincerely,



Alvin W. McLean

cc: NNJ NYC  
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