

1/30/2020

Dear Members of the Board of Correction,

We, the Steering Committee of Social Workers Against Solitary Confinement and its concerned allies (“SWASC”), are writing in support of the “Blueprint to End Solitary Confinement” in New York City’s jails.

Our mission is the abolition of solitary confinement at all levels, and within all settings in the United States. Mounting evidence shows solitary confinement causes lasting psychological and physical harm on those held in these torturous isolation cells. In addition, the United Nations Mandela Rules states that solitary confinement beyond 15 days constitutes torture.

Please know that our mission is not based on ideals far removed from the realities of managing a correctional facility. In fact, many in our membership have worked inside solitary confinement units. In particular, one of our members, Mary Buser, author of *Lockdown on Rikers: Shocking Stories of Abuse and Injustice at New York’s Notorious Jail*, is a former assistant chief of Mental Health in the Rikers Island Central Punitive Segregation Unit. She saw, firsthand, the extreme suffering of people in these cells – of incessant head-banging, suicide attempts, and self-mutilation. Despite claims that solitary confinement is for the “worst of the worst,” it was her observation and that of many others, that most of the people in these cells were there for non-violent infractions, such as walking out of a housing unit wearing a hat.

That being said, we acknowledge that there are those who engage in violent, recalcitrant behavior and pose a challenge to the safety of the jail. However, confining them to these cells is not the answer, and only increases the risk of violence once they are ultimately released. There are humane alternatives to solitary, as demonstrated by the Colorado Department of Corrections, which successfully abolished it, statewide. In an effort to better understand their strategies, about a year ago, four members of SWASC traveled to Colorado and spent two days touring three of their facilities, speaking with officers and those who had previously been held in solitary – some for decades. What we saw were calm prisons that utilized humanitarian procedures in the form of “step-down” units that allowed for ever-increasing time out of the cell, bolstered with mental health support. The goal was a successful return to the general population, and ultimately, society. And it worked, as overall violence actually decreased! Furthermore, not only did the incarcerated express hope about the program, but the correctional staff were equally enthused, with one veteran CO telling us that the changes led to his own rehabilitation.

The Blueprint for Ending Solitary Confinement in New York City’s Jails is a similar plan to Colorado’s successful program. It is time for our city to move away from this barbaric practice and embrace proven alternatives. Such a move would be of benefit to the incarcerated, correctional personnel, and ultimately, to all of us.

Sincerely,

The SWASC Steering Committee

Sandra Bernabei

Mary Buser

Ali Winters

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