

Testimony by Students Against Solitary Confinement
Silberman School of Social Work, CUNY-Hunter College
New York City Board of Correction Hearing
Re: Proposed Restrictive Housing Rule
December 16, 2019

Dear Members of the Board of Correction,

My name is Nikki Tourigny and I am here to represent a group of students from Hunter College School of Social Work who support the Blueprint to End Solitary Confinement.

We chose social work as a profession because we believe that people and communities can lift each other up. We promote social justice with and on behalf of the people who are most vulnerable, and we focus our attention on the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address individual and systemic problems. In layman's terms, when we see someone who is struggling to thrive, we don't ask what they did to deserve it, we wonder what happened that led to their struggle.

We chose CUNY because we want to believe that public institutions can work. We want to believe that our city can create and maintain effective systems to educate, heal and govern our communities. Our experience in this room has brought that faith into question.

As interns, we are here to advocate for justice while learning about the process of policymaking. Aside from receiving incredible mentorship, our one privilege as interns is that for two, full years, we get to be rookies. We get to look at everything with an inquisitive eye and ask seemingly naïve questions about circumstances that we might normalize overtime. Questions like:

1. Why is it that Board members are excused from attending monthly meetings and public hearings? The community of lawyers, social workers and advocates that regularly fill this rooms are here to represent your constituents – the people who cannot be here because they are currently stuck behind bars. We recognize that you too have full-time jobs, but we are here. Is it not the responsibility of each member of this Board to engage in dialogue with the people whom they represent?
2. Why is it that people talk about alternatives to isolation as though they are NOT an acceptable response to violence? When we advocate for rehabilitation instead of punitive segregation, we do not suggest that people avoid responsibility for their actions. We suggest that you don't fight fire with fire. Anyone who has been through good mental health therapy knows that the process of recognizing trauma, undoing harm and developing healthy coping skills is hard work. They also know that taking accountability is core to this work and that it cannot be done alone.

As social workers, we promote the responsiveness of institutions to individual needs and social problems. To this point, mission integrity is important to us, as we hope it is to those of you who represent the organizations that employ our profession. For example, Mr. Richards, as Vice President of the Fortune Society, you might "imagine a world where all who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated will thrive as positive, contributing members of society." How does solitary confinement fit into this world you've

imagined? How does the trauma of isolation prepare people to navigate family, community and the workplace when they return home? And Ms. Jones-Austin, as CEO of the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies, you've promised to "advocate for ground breaking policy change that improves the lives of millions of New Yorkers." Can you explain to us what is so groundbreaking about a solitary sentence that is four times greater than the United Nations definition of torture? Dr. Safyer, we would like to remind you, that you earned the nickname "Dr. Social Justice" by leading a medical system that both cares for people "regardless of who they are" and also "trains the next generation" of healthcare professionals. Yet the proposed rule allows someone to be locked to a restraint desk, unable to move freely during their few hours out-of-cell – what does this teach young professionals about a person's basic human right to healthcare? And finally, Ms. Sherman and Mr. Franco, you've spent your careers promoting the welfare of young people and their families – we thank you for that - and we also wonder: in what other circumstance would you permit a young person to live without access to educational programming or locked in a room for 14 hours a day?

We recognize that this rulemaking process is complicated, yet it is still hard for us to believe that this board could write the current Proposed Rules on Restrictive housing. The Board is supposed to be an independent body - not loyal to the Department or to City Hall. The Board is supposed to be loyal to the people of New York City. Any of us are at risk of incarceration – some more than others. And given the current rules that you've proposed, we are also at risk of being restrained, locked down, or confined to a cell.

As social workers, we will not be monitors for human suffering now or in the years to come. We support the Blueprint to End Solitary Confinement and the 50+ organizations that have signed-on in support of this document – organizations that this next generation of social workers will look to support after graduation. We urge you to recognize this opportunity for "groundbreaking policy change" that will "improve the lives of millions of New Yorkers". We urge you to enact rules consistent with the Blueprint, to promote alternatives-to-violence and to truly end solitary confinement in New York City.

Justice before peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nto Winyung".

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