

Comment:

My name is Misael Syldor and I am writing as a New Yorker and concerned community member. I am writing in support of the Jails Action Coalition's blueprint to end extreme isolation. I believe that someone should be separated from others if they demonstrate violent behavior, but extreme isolation does not address root causes of violence. Incarcerated people and correction officers are not safe in this current system. The Mandela Rules state that solitary confinement for longer than 15 days amounts to torture. How can we expect a safer environment in jails when our minimum standards allow for people to be tortured? There is long documented research that extreme isolation creates and exacerbates mental illness, increases the chances of self-harm and suicide, and increases the risk of death post release. A 2019 study by public health experts in North Carolina tracked people who had been released between 2000 and 2015 to measure the effects of solitary confinement. It found that those who had been in extreme isolation and released directly to the community had severe adverse outcomes compared to those who were not in isolation, including a 24% higher chance of dying, a 78% higher chance of dying by suicide, and a 127% higher chance of dying by an opioid overdose. These are shocking numbers, and shows that the suffering of solitary confinement doesn't end in that cell, it follows people. If our goals are safety and rehabilitation, we cannot create such desperate situations. In 2017, the state of Colorado ended the practice of extreme isolation. Rick Raemisch, the Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Corrections spent 20 hours in solitary before he was convinced that no human should be kept in extreme isolation. They shifted to a model where people are separated for a cooling down period if they pose a direct threat to physical safety, and are able to get congregate programming to address the root causes of violence. After this practice was implemented, assaults, forced cell entries, and the use of heavy restraints declined by 40%. Those who pose a security risk are held in separation, but not extreme isolation, allowing them to address their behavior without debilitating effects to their mental health. New York City should be able to follow in the spirit of these reforms. One person losing their life to isolation is one too many, and there have been far too many. We can't keep using Kalief Browder's name as we champion our reforms if we maintain this system. The advocates who have survived extreme isolation that we respect and champion today could have been those tragedies. I am grateful to God they are not. Solitary breaks people. That shouldn't be allowed in a "justice" system. With the City Council vote to close Rikers, we are moving towards a new era of justice. Ending extreme isolation is one step in that direction. Be the leader our city needs. Thank you.

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