



THE COUNCIL OF
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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SPEAKER

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Martha King
Executive Director
New York City Board of Correction
1 Centre Street, Rm. 2213
New York, NY 10007

Dear Director King:

We write today to urge the Board of Correction (BOC) to update its standards on punitive segregation and conduct a review of solitary confinement with an aim toward ending the practice.

The recent death of Layleen Polanco – a young transgender woman of color held in solitary confinement on Rikers Island – highlights the urgent need to reform our current system of restricted housing. This tragedy reflects the broader failure on the part of the City to address the harmful effects of solitary confinement on incarcerated individuals' mental health, physical well-being, and humanity.

We ask the BOC to pass new rules implementing the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term Solitary Confinement Act (HALT) on the local level. As of now, incarcerated individuals can be placed in solitary confinement for a maximum of 30 consecutive days or 60 days over the course of a six-month period. HALT, which failed to pass through the State Legislature this session, would cap the amount of time an individual can spend in punitive segregation at 15 consecutive days or 20 days within a 60-day period.

Additionally, while the BOC has already prohibited solitary confinement for individuals under 21, there are still several categories of people who can be placed in solitary confinement, including pregnant women, new mothers, and people 55 years of age or older. We must work to prevent these vulnerable groups from being placed in solitary confinement.

HALT would also mitigate the harmful impacts of solitary confinement by increasing the amount of time incarcerated individuals can leave their cells from four to six hours a day. This change would not only make our jails more humane, it would also make them safer. Solitary confinement causes individuals to experience heightened anxiety, anger and irritability, confused thought processes, hallucinations, and suicidal thoughts. As a result, incarcerated individuals held in solitary confinement are more likely to harm others or themselves when they return to the general population.

The fight to end solitary confinement has broad support from international bodies and human rights organizations. The United Nations has called solitary confinement a form of torture and prohibited it under its Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. The New York Civil Liberties Union advocated for its complete abolition. In light of this support, the BOC should take stronger, more decisive measures to put an end to a practice that is widely condemned by the international community.

We want to underscore that we take the safety of the officers and staff in New York City jails very seriously and understand that many view solitary confinement as necessary to preserve that safety. That is why we believe the BOC should continue to permit some limited form of isolation for those who pose a real danger to or commit violence against others. However, the extent of this isolation must be consistent with international standards, and time spent in this form of housing must focus on addressing the issues underlying these individuals' behavior. The BOC should examine how to go beyond the short-term goal of isolating an individual from others to the long-term goal of preventing any future violence.

New York City should be a leader in creating a humane jail system. Solitary confinement is a cruel and unusual punishment that inflicts great harm upon individuals, the clear majority of whom have only been accused and not convicted of any crimes. It is time to send a message to the state that we will not stand for a system that does not uphold human rights and dignity.

Sincerely,



COREY JOHNSON
Speaker



KEITH POWERS
Chair, Committee on Criminal Justice