



EMBARGOED UNTIL:
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NEW YORK LAWMAKERS INTRODUCE SWEEPING REFORMS TO USE OF SOLITARY CONFINEMENT IN PRISONS AND JAILS

The "HALT Solitary Confinement Act" Would Eliminate Extreme Isolation Beyond 15 Days, Create Safe and Humane Alternatives

New York, January 31 -- At a mid-morning press conference at Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, New York legislators joined advocates, survivors of solitary confinement, and their families to announce the introduction of the **Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act** (A08588 / S06466).

Introduced in both the Assembly and the Senate, the pioneering bill is being hailed by supporters as the most comprehensive and progressive legislative response to date to the nationwide problem of solitary confinement in prisons and jails. As written, it would virtually eliminate a practice that has been increasingly denounced as both dangerous and torturous, while protecting the safety of incarcerated individuals and corrections officers.

According to **Assembly Member Jeffrion Aubry**, who is sponsoring the bill in the Assembly, "New York State was a leader for the country in passing the 2008 SHU Exclusion Law, which keeps people with the most severe mental health needs out of solitary confinement. Now we must show the way forward again, ensuring that we provide safe, humane and effective alternatives to solitary for all people."

"Solitary confinement makes people suffer without making our prisons safer. It is counter-productive as well as cruel," said **Senator Bill Perkins**, the bill's Senate sponsor. "Solitary harms not only those who endure it, but families, communities, and corrections staff as well."

Currently, about 3,800 people are in Special Housing Units, or SHUs, with many more in other forms of isolated confinement in New York's State prisons on any given day, held for 23 to 24 hours a day in cells smaller than the average parking space, alone or with one other person. More than 800 are in solitary confinement in New York City jails, along with hundreds more in local jails across the state.

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New York isolates imprisoned people at levels well above the national average, and uses solitary to punish minor disciplinary violations. Five out of six sentences that result in placement in New York State's SHUs are for non-violent conduct. Individuals are sent to the SHU on the word of prison staff, and may remain there for months, years, or even decades.

The HALT Solitary Confinement Act bans extreme isolation beyond 15 days--the limit advocated by UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Juan E. Méndez, among others. It also bars vulnerable populations from being placed in solitary at all--including youth, the elderly, pregnant women, LGBTI individuals, and those with physical or mental disabilities.

"No person should be put in solitary confinement except when they are a risk to someone else," said **New York City Council Member Daniel Dromm**. "As a major opponent of the practice, I have introduced three pieces of legislation into the City Council. I applaud the proposed state legislation that sets parameters on who can and who cannot be placed in solitary confinement and limits the amount of time they are forced to stay there."

For those who present a serious threat to prison safety and need to be separated from the general population for longer periods of time, the legislation creates new Residential Rehabilitation Units (RRUs)--high-security units with substantial out-of-cell time, and programs aimed at addressing the underlying causes of behavioral problems.

"Isolation does not promote positive change in people; it only damages them," said **Jennifer J. Parish of the Urban Justice Center's Mental Health Project**. "By requiring treatment and programs for people who are separated from the prison population for serious misconduct, the legislation requires Corrections to emphasize rehabilitation over punishment and degradation."

"The HALT Solitary Confinement Act recognizes that we need a fundamental transformation of how our public institutions address people's needs and behaviors, both in our prisons and in our communities," said **Scott Paltrowitz of the Correctional Association of New York**. "Rather than inhumane and ineffective punishment, deprivation, and isolation, HALT would provide people with greater support, programs, and treatment to help them thrive, and in turn make our prisons and our communities safer."

Many of those represented at the press conference are members of the **New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (CAIC)**, which was instrumental in drafting the bill. CAIC unites advocates, concerned community members, lawyers, and individuals in the human rights, health, and faith communities throughout New York State with formerly incarcerated people and family members of currently incarcerated people.

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"Solitary is torture on both sides of the prison walls," said **family member Donna Sorge-Ruiz**, whose fiancé is currently in solitary. "Loved ones on the outside suffer right along with those in prison, every day that they endure this pain. It must stop!"

The widespread use of long-term solitary confinement has been under fire in recent years, in the face of increasing evidence that sensory deprivation, lack of normal human interaction, and extreme idleness can lead to severe psychological damage. Supporters of the bill also say that isolated confinement fails to address the underlying causes of problematic behavior, and often exacerbates that behavior as people deteriorate psychologically, physically, and socially.

In New York each year, nearly 2,000 people are released directly from extreme isolation to the streets, a practice that has been shown to increase recidivism rates.

"The damage done by solitary confinement is deep and permanent," said **solitary survivor Five Mualimm-ak**. An activist with CAIC and the Campaign to End the New Jim Crow, Mualimm-ak spent five years in isolated confinement despite never having committed a violent act in prison. "Having humane alternatives will spare thousands of people the pain and suffering that extreme isolation causes--and the scars that they carry with them back into our communities."

Several state prisons systems, including Maine, Mississippi, and Colorado, have significantly reduced the number of people they hold in solitary confinement, and have seen prison violence decrease as well. HALT takes reform a step further by also providing alternatives for the relatively small number of individuals who need to be separated from the general population for more than a few weeks. Advocates see the bill not only as a major step toward humane and evidence-based prison policies, but also as a model for change across the country.

"Article 5 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, states that 'No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment,'" said **Laura Markle Downton of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture**. "As people of faith, we recognize the use of solitary confinement in a prisons, jails and detention centers fundamentally violates this prohibition against torture. Now is the time for New York to lead the way in bringing an end to this human rights abuse plaguing our justice system nationally."

"The HALT Solitary Confinement Act implements rational humane alternatives to the costly, ineffective, and abusive use of long-term solitary confinement in New York prisons and jails," said **Sarah Kerr of the Legal Aid Society's Prisoners' Rights Project**. "The need for reform is well-documented and the time for change is now."

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PRESS CONFERENCE DETAILS:

Date/Time/ Location: Friday, January 31, 10:30 am
Judson Memorial Church, Meeting Room Balcony
55 Washington Square South (between Thompson and Sullivan Streets)

Speakers:

Assembly Member Jeffrion L. Aubry (D, 35th District, Queens), Assembly sponsor

Senator Bill Perkins (D, 30th District, Harlem), Senate sponsor

City Council Member Daniel Dromm (D, 25th District, Queens)

Five Mualimm-ak, survivor of solitary confinement in New York prisons and
Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement

Jessica Casanova, aunt of individual currently in solitary and Campaign for
Alternatives to Isolated Confinement

Scott Paltrowitz, Correctional Association of New York and Campaign for
Alternatives to Isolated Confinement

Claire Deroche, National Religious Campaign Against Torture and Campaign for
Alternatives to Isolated Confinement

PRESS KIT INCLUDES:

Press Release

Fact Sheet on Solitary Confinement in New York State

Summary of the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act

Full Text of HALT Act (A08588 / S06466)

New York Voices from Solitary Confinement

"Solitary Confinement's Invisible Scars," op-ed by Five Mualimm-ak

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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