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March 12, 2012

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New York Groups Unite in Call for Alternatives to Solitary Confinement in Prisons and Jails

NEW YORK -- Dozens of organizations joined together today to challenge the torturous abuse of solitary confinement in prisons and jails across New York, urging Governor Andrew Cuomo, the New York legislature, and state and city corrections officials to "Think Outside the Box." The [Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement \(CAIC\)](#) is a state-wide campaign of organizations and concerned community members, including formerly incarcerated persons and family members of loved ones in isolated confinement. CAIC is engaged in public education and community outreach in order to organize support for an end to solitary confinement.

CAIC was formed in response to New York's practice of using isolated confinement far too broadly, routinely, and for far too long a period of time. In fact, New York holds people in isolated confinement at rates significantly above the national average. On any given day, there are nearly 4,500 people, disproportionately people of color, in New York State prisons who are in special housing units (SHU) and thousands more subjected to keeplock, two forms of isolated confinement. There are also around 1,000 people in New York City jails in isolation.

All of these individuals are confined in a cell for 22 to 24 hours a day without meaningful human contact, programming, or therapy. People are often subjected to these conditions for months, years, and decades at a time. Whether called the Box, the Bing, the SHU, solitary, or isolation, such inhumane conditions often cause deep and permanent psychological, physical, and social harm both for persons who are mentally stable and for people with pre-existing mental health needs or disabilities.

"Isolated confinement can have a devastating impact on people sent to the Box as well as their families," said Adam "Big Chief" Ramos, a member of the New York State Prisoner Justice Network, "and we need to get people out now." As one of the most distressing manifestations of the serious harm caused by isolation, rates of self-harm and suicide are significantly higher among people in solitary than among those in the general prison population. As Center for Constitutional Rights Senior Staff attorney Rachel Meeropol explained, "It is because of this well-documented and devastating harm that there is a developing consensus among the international human rights community that prolonged solitary confinement is torture."

"Extreme isolation is one of the most extreme, inhumane, and counterproductive forms of punishment one human can force on another, and in New York State it is often a disciplinary tool of first resort," said Donna Lieberman, Executive Director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, which recently published a detailed report, [Boxed In: The True Cost of Extreme Isolation in New York's Prisons](#). Indeed, New York State prisons impose more than 35,000 disciplinary sentences that result in either SHU or keeplock time in a given year. Five out of six disciplinary infractions that result in SHU time are for non-violent alleged rule violations.

Moreover, as highlighted in the NYCLU's report, each year about 2,000 people are released straight from isolation cells to the street with absolutely no programming to aid that transition. "It is time for this barbaric practice to end, and for those who have been in the SHU to receive the support and treatment they need to cope with the debilitating long term impacts," said Tyrell Muhammad of The Correctional Association of New York.

CAIC believes there needs to be a legislative solution in New York to end all long-term isolation, to drastically reduce the length of time anyone spends in isolated confinement, and to dramatically restrict the number of people subjected to isolated confinement. Although some corrections officials have stated that isolation is needed for safety and security reasons, other states, such as Mississippi and Maine, have dramatically reduced the use of solitary and seen an improvement in prison safety at the same time.

CAIC also calls for the automatic exclusion of vulnerable people from isolated confinement, including young people and people with significant physical and mental health needs. "No child should ever be placed in solitary," said Five Mualimm-ak of the Jails Action Coalition and the Campaign to End the New Jim Crow, "because the effects can be even more devastating in terms of the child's development and growth." Yet, according to Amy Fettig, senior staff attorney in the National Prison Project of the ACLU, which in collaboration with Human Rights Watch recently released [Growing Up Locked Down: Youth in Solitary Confinement](#), "Each day, children as young as 16 are held in solitary in adult jails and prisons. Locking kids in solitary is cruel, harmful, and unnecessary. New York should be investing in its youth, not banishing them."

If there are a small number of people who need to be removed from the general prison population because they face or pose a great risk of harm, then they must receive – not deprivation – but additional therapeutic support, programs, and services to help address the underlying causes of their behavior. As Sarah Kerr of the Legal Aid Society remarked, "people may be *separated* without being held in isolation, and that separation should be for the least amount of time needed to reduce the risks to safety."

"We need a fundamental transformation of how corrections officials understand and respond to problematic behavior," says Jennifer Parish of the Urban Justice Center, "we no longer can allow ineffective, inhumane responses that exacerbate the problems; we want safe, humane, and effective responses that fit in line with our fundamental human values and make things safer for our prisons and our communities."

For more information about CAIC, please visit <http://nycaic.org/> or contact: Scott Paltrowitz at spaltrowitz@correctionalassociation.org or Five Mualimm-ak at endthenewjimcrow@gmail.com.

Members of the Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement

[The Bronx Defenders](#)

[Campaign to End the New Jim Crow](#)

[Center for Community Alternatives](#)

[Center for Constitutional Rights](#)

[The Correctional Association of New York](#)

[The Legal Aid Society](#)

[Long Island Council of Churches](#)

[Mass Incarceration Committee, New York City Chapter, National Lawyers Guild](#)

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[Muslim Defense Project, New York City Chapter, National Lawyers Guild](#)

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[New York State Prisoner Justice Network](#)

[Prison Action Network](#)

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[Social Justice Committee of the Ithaca Monthly Meeting Religious Society of Friends](#)

[Social Justice Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock](#)

[T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights](#)

[Urban Justice Center](#)

[Uri L'Tzedek](#)

[Voices Of Community Activists and Leaders \(VOCAL-NY\)](#)