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**For immediate release: December 6, 2013**

**Human Rights Day Vigils Will Challenge the Torture**

**of Solitary Confinement in New York**

**Use of prison isolation violates basic human rights, say activists and survivors.**

**Vigil to be held on December 10 in New York City's Foley Square, with additional events on Long Island and Upstate.**

 **Letters urge Governor and U.S. State Department to grant UN access to**

**New York's prisons and jails.**

**NEW YORK** -- Representatives of human rights, civil liberties, and religious organizations will join formerly incarcerated people and family members of those in solitary confinement at several vigils across the state, to protest the routine use of extreme and prolonged isolation in New York's state prisons and city jails.

The largest vigil, which is part of a longer event highlighting current human rights issues in New York, will take place on Human Rights Day, **Tuesday, December 10, from 4 - 5 pm in Lower Manhattan's Foley Square**, within sight of several courthouses and detention centers.

Billed as a "Teach-in and Speak-out," the vigil will feature advocates from the Campaign for Alternatives to Solitary Confinement (CAIC), including individuals who have been directly affected by the use of solitary confinement. The vigil will conclude with the words of people currently in solitary, read by representatives of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture.

"We want New Yorkers to recognize that there are serious human rights violations going on in their own backyards," said Five Omar Mualimm-ak of the American Friends Service Committee, a survivor of five years in solitary confinement in New York state prisons and an organizer of the vigil. "By depriving people of all human contact, solitary confinement causes extreme anguish and permanent psychological damage," Mualimm-ak continued. "That's why it has been widely denounced as torture."

On Long Island, a Human Rights Day vigil will be held on **Saturday, December 14, at 12 noon at the Nassau County Jail in East Meadow**, also featuring religious leaders, activists, survivors, and family members. "We know that our children or spouses can be sent to these houses of torture for the slightest infraction," said Barbara Allan of Long Island's Prison Families Anonymous. "We know the consequences, and we worry about how this will affect them upon release."

In Upstate New York, the site of most of the state's 62 prisons, opponents of solitary will gather for a vigil in **Ithaca on Sunday, December 8, at 2 pm in front of Tompkins County Library**. The vigil will be followed by a write-a-thon to incarcerated individuals at Tompkins County Workers’ Center, with Amnesty International. The Ithaca Prisoner Justice Network is also holding a letter writing campaign in three local Episcopal churches to urge policy-makers to take action to end isolated confinement.

A vigil will also be held on **December 10 at St Lawrence** **University in Canton.** A group of students will spend the day inside chalk outlines of 7 x10-foot cells to call attention to the use of solitary in New York.

According to CAIC, New York's prison and jails use solitary and other forms of isolated confinement far too broadly and routinely, and for periods of time, namely months and years, that far exceed the 15 day-limit recommended by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture. New York holds people in 23-hour-a-day isolation at rates significantly above the national average. On any given day, there are at least 4,000 people, disproportionately people of color, in New York State prisons who are in special housing units (SHU) and thousands more locked down in their own cells. In addition, approximately 1,000 people in New York City jails are held in isolation.

Solitary confinement often causes deep and permanent psychological, physical, and social harm for those who endure it, and can have even more dire consequences for the many incarcerated individuals with pre-existing mental health needs or disabilities, and for youth. Prolonged isolation has been shown to be counterproductive as well as inhumane, since it can increase both prison violence and recidivism levels.

“We need a fundamental transformation of how corrections officials understand and respond to problematic behavior,” says Jennifer Parish of the Urban Justice Center, a CAIC member group that helped to spearhead the rallies around the state. “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.”

Solitary confinement in New York's state prisons has been challenged not only by advocates, but by UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Juan E. Méndez. In March of 2013, Méndez wrote to the U.S. government, seeking information about the practice of extreme isolation and solitary confinement in New York State prisons and the welfare of three individuals subjected to this treatment.

This week, **CAIC sent letters to both U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and New York Governor Andrew M. Cuomo**, urging them to provide the requested information, and to facilitate Mr. Méndez's access to conduct fact-finding visits to New York prisons and jails. "With Human Rights Day approaching," the letter reads, "we join in calling on you to take these steps to honor the humanity and dignity of New Yorkers suffering the torture of solitary confinement."

**Survivors of solitary confinement and families of those currently in isolation are available for interview in New York City and on Long Island.**

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**Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (CAIC) Organizational Members**

[American Friends Service Committee](http://afsc.org/office/new-york-ny)

The Blue Lantern Group

[The Bronx Defenders](http://www.bronxdefenders.org/)

[Campaign to End the New Jim Crow](http://www.endnewjimcrow.org/)

[Center for Community Alternatives](http://www.communityalternatives.org/)

[Center for Constitutional Rights](http://ccrjustice.org/)

[Community Service Society of New York](http://www.cssny.org/)

[The Correctional Association of New York](http://www.correctionalassociation.org/issue/solitary-confinement)

[Episcopal Peace Fellowship – Western New York Chapter](http://www.epfwny.org/)

[The Legal Aid Society](http://www.legal-aid.org/en/home.aspx)

[The LesFa Corporation](http://www.thelesfacorp.org/)

[Long Island Council of Churches](http://www.ncccusa.org/ecmin/licc/)

[Mass Incarceration Committee, New York City Chapter, National Lawyers Guild](http://nlgnyc.org/2012/12/24/the-nlg-nyc-in-the-streets-in-the-courts-in-the-struggle/)

[Maurus and Heinegg](http://mauruslaw.com/)

[Milk Not Jails](http://milknotjails.wordpress.com/)

[Muslim Defense Project, New York City Chapter, National Lawyers Guild](http://nlgnyc.org/about-us/committees/mdp/)

[National Alliance on Mental Illness – New York State](http://www.naminys.org/)

[National Alliance on Mental Illness – Queens/Nassau](https://www.facebook.com/namiqn/info?ref=mf)

[National Lawyers Guild, New York City Chapter](http://nlgnyc.org/)

[National Police Accountability Project](http://www.nlg-npap.org/)

[National Religious Campaign Against Torture](http://www.nrcat.org/)

[New York Civil Liberties Union](http://www.nyclu.org/issues/due-process-and-justice)

[New York Law Collective](https://www.facebook.com/NYLawCollective)

[New York Province of the Society of Jesus](http://nysj.org/s/316/index.aspx)

[New York State Council of Churches](https://sites.google.com/site/nyscouncilofchurches/)

[New York State Prisoner Justice Network](http://www.nysprisonerjustice.org/)

[Prison Action Network](http://prisonaction.blogspot.com/)

[Prison Families Anonymous](http://www.pfa-li.com/)

[Prisoners Are People Too](http://www.prp2.org/)

[Prisoners’ Legal Services of New York](http://plsny.org/)

[Riverside Prison Ministry](http://www.theriversidechurchny.org/getinvolved/?prison)

[Social Justice Committee of the Ithaca Monthly Meeting Religious Society of Friends](http://ithacamonthlymeeting.org/)

[Social Justice Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock](http://www.uucsr.org/justice.asp)

[T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights](http://www.truah.org/)

[Urban Justice Center](http://www.urbanjustice.org/)

[Uri L’Tzedek](http://www.utzedek.org/)

[Voices Of Community Activists and Leaders (VOCAL-NY)](http://www.vocal-ny.org/)

[Western New York Peace Center](http://wnypeace.org/new/)

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