



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE...

Contact: Jerome Wright, jwright@nycaic.org, 716-909-2425

Watch a recording of the press conference using [this link](#) (password: 7E%zES9@)

***IN ACTIONS OUTSIDE NEW YORK POLITICAL
LEADERS' OFFICES & ACROSS NY STATE, ADVOCATES
DEMANDED AN END TO DEATH & SUFFERING OF
BLACK PEOPLE AND OTHER PEOPLE OF COLOR IN
SOLITARY CONFINEMENT***

***PARTICIPANTS CALLED ON NEW YORK STATE TO PASS
THE HALT SOLITARY CONFINEMENT ACT***

(New York, NY) -- Today, in the midst of the largest uprising against racist state violence in at least a generation, solitary survivors, family members, and allies across New York State held concurrent demonstrations outside political leaders offices and in every corner of the state demanding that Governor Cuomo, Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, and Speaker Heastie immediately enact the HALT Solitary Confinement Act to end the racist and deadly torture of solitary confinement. Solitary has killed and destroyed the lives of countless Black people and other People of Color and is also disproportionately inflicted against [Black Trans people](#). It has been one year since solitary confinement killed Layleen Polanco, three years since solitary killed Dante Taylor, and five years since solitary killed Kalief Browder. In 2019, we know of at least six people who were tortured to death in solitary in New York prisons alone.

Jerome Wright, Statewide Organizer for the #HALTsolitary Campaign, said: “This is a very daunting time with the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks and too many others. We often forget those who died behind bars and particularly those in solitary confinement. Today I speak of their names on the one year anniversary of the death of Layleen Polanco, who died in solitary confinement. The three year anniversary of the death of Dante Taylor, who also died in solitary confinement. The five year anniversary of the death of Kalief Browder. Today, I’m sad to tell you that we have lost another of our Black young men, Jamel McIntosh, who sadly just a few weeks ago died in solitary confinement at Lakeview Correctional Facility. These are not the names that the politicians are talking about. But these are the names of our friends and loved ones who continue to die unnecessarily in torturous conditions because of the failure of the legislature to pass HALT. We say all Black lives matter. Incarcerated people’s lives matter, too.”

Jah Power, who survived years of solitary confinement in both juvenile detention and prison, protested outside Gov. Cuomo’s office and said: “I’m 24 years old. I served solitary in both juvenile confinement and prison. The first reason I oppose solitary is the communication between the incarcerated person and family is cut off. If you don’t have no money, you can’t send no letters. Second, they deprive you of food. Your stomach growls. The third thing is, if you’re locked in a room for six, seven, eight months with no TV, no books, no one to talk to, the mind is gonna start playing tricks on you. And as a juvenile, I don’t think that’s a good thing to do.”

Leonard Thomas, VOCAL-NY member and survivor of solitary confinement, joined the rally outside Senate Leader Stewart-Cousins’ Yonkers office and said: “No human should be put in a cage. Every cage is a crisis and needs to be treated as such. Yet we hear silence from the elected leaders of New York State, Senate Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins, Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie and Governor Andrew Cuomo. Your silence equates to state-sanctioned violence. Many people are experiencing forced isolation in quarantine for the first time. You think being stuck at home with loved ones for three months is hard, imagine being stuck in a 90-degree six-by-eight foot concrete cell, all by yourself for 23 hours a day. No

entertainment, no human contact, except for the guards, the very people taunting and abusing you. Leader Stewart-Cousins, Speaker Heastie and Governor Cuomo, we are calling on you as elected leaders of New York State to show the political will to bring the HALT solitary bill to the floor for a vote.”

Lady Kathryn Williams-Julien of the Coalition for Women Prisoners and a survivor of solitary confinement rallied outside Speaker Heastie’s Bronx office and said, “In 1997, I was incarcerated due to a domestic violence incident where I took the life of my batterer. During my first 84 days on Rikers Island, I was assaulted. They placed me in solitary confinement. While in solitary confinement, I was assaulted again, this time at the hands of those who were hired to protect me. So not only was I a victim but I was re-victimized. Once I was found out to have a mental disorder, I received a diagnosis of PTSD. I thought that was for someone who’s been at war, but trauma is sometimes just like a war. I have to live with that diagnosis for the rest of my life. I’m here to say today we must abolish solitary confinement because all it’s doing is creating human zombies. Please support the HALT bill and pass it.”

Denise Edmunds, a HALT member, rallied in Buffalo’s Niagara Square and said: “My son was injured in solitary confinement. In 2018 I did a wellness check for my son at Orleans County Jail. When I got there, they told me my son was hospitalized. I went to see him but because he was in solitary confinement during the time of his injury I wasn’t allowed to see him. Since then they have blocked me 5 months and didn’t allow me to see my son. When my son was finally released, I found him wandering in a catatonic state in Dunkirk, New York. They just released him in a catatonic state. Didn’t even tell the family. Solitary confinement should be stopped because guards shouldn’t be able to hide their victims in solitary confinement.”

Anitiria Blue, graduate of NewHour for Women and Children-Long Island and survivor of solitary confinement, rallied in Hauppauge and said: “I’ve been incarcerated for 17 and a half years, during which I have done solitary several times, mostly for things that I have not done. Solitary confinement is inhumane and should be done away with altogether because of the long term impact that it has on

our psychological mindset. Although I am a survivor I still suffer the long-term consequences of solitary confinement. There is absolutely no humanity in solitary. I just want to bring to your attention the COVID impact of having to be confined to our homes and then feeling like you're in prison. And I feel sad for everyone who felt like they were in prison but if you've never been in prison, if you've never been in solitary, this was a walk in the park for those of us who have been in solitary. So you can only imagine how difficult and how painful it was for those of us who were in solitary confinement during our incarceration. If you think this is bad, think about not having anything to your benefit, not having enough food, proper clothing, having to be confined 23, 24 hours a day. So I urge the politicians to please pass the HALT bill now before more lives are lost.”

Serena Liguori, executive director of New Hour for Women and Children—Long Island and a survivor of solitary, said: “What we're here to say is that solitary is torture. All of us have been isolated to some degree during COVID, but in our homes. Imagine being locked in your bathroom all this time, or for decades. That’s more like solitary. You can't tell me that isn't torture. This is the post-George Floyd reality and we are demanding action to pass the HALT bill from our Long Island Senators. We are calling on the brutality that happens behind bars to be exposed. Because what happens behind bars stays behind bars. What happened in the street we got a video of. We have people who record. In prison there is no such thing. Solitary kills people, it diminishes mental capacity and creates physical disability. Solitary is torture and we need Governor Cuomo to stand up, step up, and push this forward. When we sit silently by, we are complicit to what is happening to our families, our loved ones across NY State, our women and men behind bars. They don't deserve to be tortured.”

Doug Van Zandt, father of the late Ben Van Zandt, rallied outside the State Capitol, pointed to the offices of political leaders, noted they are the problem and the reason HALT has not passed, and said: “Our son had a severe mental illness at a very young age and at 17 years old he was put into prison and horrendous things happened to him. Three and a half years later he hanged himself in solitary confinement. And I cannot express the feelings we had, the horror, the pain that we went through, to be so helpless to see him be tortured in prison, sexually assaulted,

and to fear for his own life. We know that goes on with other parents, and it will continue to go on if we don't pass the HALT bill. It's the right thing. We have to do it as human beings.”

BACKGROUND: As massive numbers of people have risen up to demand that the state stop killing Black people and other People of Color in the streets and behind bars, New York’s political leaders have ignored people killed in New York's prisons and jails. There is an ongoing and deadly [scourge of racial bias](#) in New York State prisons that has never been addressed. Solitary confinement epitomizes the racist and deadly state violence inflicted by the incarceration system. While Black people represent only 18% of all New Yorkers, 48% of people in NY prisons are Black people and [57% of people in solitary confinement](#) are Black people. Given the longstanding racism in New York’s prison system, unsurprisingly [over 80%](#) of the people who have died in prison since the outbreak of COVID-19 are People of Color (59% are Black people).

Solitary confinement is torture that causes immense suffering, devastating physical and mental harm, and far too commonly leads to psychosis, heart disease, self-mutilation, and death. Deemed torture under international standards, people in solitary are locked in a cell without meaningful human contact or programming. The #HALTsolitary campaign recently released a [devastating new report](#) documenting a surge in suicide and self-harm in New York prisons, driven by solitary confinement. In 2019 alone - since Democrats took full control of the state legislature - at least six people were tortured to death in solitary confinement in New York prisons. A total of 18 people died by suicide in NY prisons in 2019, the highest rate since at least 2000 and a rate 88% higher than the national average, and as of April 2020, five people already had died by suicide in New York prisons this year. Equally alarming, suicide attempts in New York prisons occur nearly every day, with the rate of suicide attempts in solitary 12 times the rest of the prison population.

Experts agree that the sensory deprivation, lack of normal interaction, and extreme idleness of solitary can lead to severe [psychological](#), [physical](#), and even [neurological](#) damage. New [Cornell research](#) found that even a few days in solitary

confinement – and even only one or two days of solitary – led to significantly heightened risk of death by accident, suicide, violence, and other causes. One study [published this summer](#) in the Journal of General Internal Medicine found that solitary confinement is associated with a [31% increase in hypertension](#). Approximately one-in-three people in solitary who participated in the study were more likely to experience heart attacks, strokes, and – unsurprisingly – higher degrees of loneliness, which also [contributes](#) to heart disease. This study was followed by another one this fall which found solitary confinement is associated with [increased rates of death after release](#), particularly by suicide as well as overdose.

During the current pandemic, the harm and spread of the virus has been exacerbated by the failure to release people from prison and the [state's medically inappropriate and dangerous use of solitary confinement](#) in contravention of health experts' recommendations and instead of proper quarantine, medical isolation, care and treatment. At the same time, New Yorkers abiding by orders to mostly remain at home are getting just a small [glimpse](#) of the [exponentially more devastating horrors](#) of solitary confinement.

Despite the known harms of even the shortest periods of time in solitary, New York State regularly holds people - disproportionately Black people and other People of Color - in solitary for months, years, and decades. New York's use of solitary confinement had actually [increased](#) since Governor Cuomo claimed to have implemented reforms in 2015, with more than 38,000 solitary sentences in 2018 and 81% of people in solitary being Black and/or Latinx. The #HALTsolitary campaign - an effort led by survivors of solitary confinement and their loved ones – is calling for lawmakers to enact [the H.A.L.T. Solitary Confinement Act](#) – which has majority support in both the Senate and Assembly – to end this racist torture and replace it with [more humane and effective alternatives](#).

While Governor Cuomo has put forward proposed regulations on solitary confinement, [an analysis shows](#) these regulations will continue to allow people to be held in solitary for months and years, including for minor infractions.

Thanks to efforts led by survivors of solitary and their family members, there are more than enough votes in the Legislature to pass HALT. 34 New York State Senators from Long Island to Upstate New York are officially co-sponsoring the HALT Solitary Confinement Act – a clear majority – and additional Senators have committed to vote for the bill as well. 79 New York State Assembly Members also officially co-sponsor HALT – another clear majority – and the bill passed in that house in 2018. An [analysis](#) shows HALT will save money.

Learn more at www.nycaic.org.

###