

To Whom It May Concern,

I hope all is well.

Thank you for the work you have done thus far to make our communities equitable and just.

I write because as a U.S. citizen of goodwill living in New York City and as an educator, I am deeply grieved by New York's current practices of solitary confinement, which I find to be dehumanizing and ineffective, if our true goal is to provide lawbreakers with opportunities for rehabilitation and reintegration into our society. Solitary confinement as it has been construed does not allow our incarcerated citizens--fellow brothers and sisters in the human family--to pursue lives not rooted in violence and harm. To use solitary on a whim, without critical consideration for its harmful effects on the psychological and physical well being of citizens, is to ensure that cycles of violence continue unabated. Solitary destroys human lives. It does not repair them, as it violently wrenches humans from webs of relation that hold the potential to heal and support them.

I understand that tomorrow there is a public hearing to consider the current Board proposal to petition to DOC to weaken its minimum standards so that DOC can create Enhanced Supervision Housing Units (ESHU). I am concerned that ESHU will not solve but deepen the injustices represented by solitary confinement, as they are not rooted in a fundamental change of how our state practices solitary. Furthermore, ensuring that 16- or 17-year-olds won't experience solitary, as the Board's proposal advocates, does not go far enough in revising our practice of solitary.

We need comprehensive reform, an overhaul in our practice of solitary, as well as in our conceptual framework for administering it. What are we really after? What kind of society do we want? What values do we want our practices to embody? We need concrete revisions, and we need to hold ourselves accountable to those revisions. We need time limits on solitary confinement sentences such that no one is held in isolation for more than 15 days. Incarcerated people with mental or physical disabilities or serious injuries and pregnant women should not be placed in solitary confinement. No one should be placed in solitary confinement as a punishment for a nonviolent rule violation. Furthermore, the DOC should develop disciplinary practices that provide incentives for positive behavior and offers out-of-cell programming tailored to individual needs. Correction officers must receive anti-violence, dispute resolution, and communication skills training so that they are better able to serve our fellow citizens. Lastly, any person subjected to solitary should have the opportunity to appeal their sanction with adequate representation without a conflict of interest.

I have heard and read the stories of citizens held in solitary for years on and off. My heart has been overwhelmed with grief, and I write to voice my desire for a just system that does not exploit lawbreakers, but invests in them, so that their humanity may be preserved and their rights not violated. If we ever hope to have a society that is truly healthy, we must revise how we treat those who violate societal norms. We must not exercise power over them in harmful ways simply because they are under our control to some degree. Being convicted means that they have already been judged. We mustn't mete out punishment that serves only to injure and demean.

As a person of faith and democratic commitment, I long for systems that realize our stated commitment to democracy and the beliefs of many of us that the Creator has imprinted Its image on every human being. Therefore, each human is of infinite worth and ought to be treated accordingly.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,
Jason Craige Harris