
ACTION GUIDE



SOLITARY CONFINEMENT TOOLKIT

What is solitary confinement?

Solitary confinement is the isolation of a person in a jail or prison cell for all or nearly all day with little environmental stimulation or opportunity for human interaction. Solitary confinement in Virginia is considered 20 hours per day in isolation away from the rest of the prison population for adults, and 17 hours a day for juvenile offenders.

Solitary Confinement in Virginia?

There are no laws governing the way solitary confinement, restrictive housing, is used in the Virginia prison system, nor any laws that require correctional officials to collect and report data on why and how it is used.

According to the Virginia Department of Corrections' own numbers, more than 7,000 people incarcerated in Virginia prisons were placed in solitary confinement units known as "restrictive housing" at some point between July 1, 2018, and June 30, 2019. That number does not include people placed in solitary confinement conditions throughout Virginia's federal prisons, let alone Virginia county or city jails or juvenile detention facilities.

The practice of solitary confinement is completely unregulated and unreported in Virginia. Despite what the VDOC claims, solitary confinement is not necessary to safely house the "worst of the worst." Virginia has no rules restricting the use of solitary confinement for vulnerable populations such as people with mental illness, physical ailments, or disabilities, those who are pregnant, juveniles, or the elderly.

Source: ACLU of Virginia

The Problem

Prison cells used for solitary are intentionally designed “to minimize human contact and environmental stimulation.” Solitary confinement has many euphemisms, but its defining characteristics remain the same: extreme isolation for weeks or months, sometimes years, in an 80 square foot cell with a bunk, toilet, and sink, with little or no access to see outside their cell, devoid of any meaningful human contact or social interaction. Prisoners in solitary confinement are generally deprived of all meaningful perceptual, social, occupational stimulation and human interaction which are required to maintain a sense of identity and a grasp of reality. The only interactions a prisoner in solitary confinement may have are when a prison employee slides a meal tray through the cell’s slot, brief encounters with correctional officers, or occasionally some prisoners have visits with attorneys or health professionals.

Regardless of the whether solitary confinement is called “restricted housing,” solitary confinement or isolation, the conditions and practice are the same: extreme isolation of an individual with deprivation of any meaningful human or sensory stimuli for approximately 22 to 24 hours per day, which causes harm, sometimes irreparably. The conditions of solitary confinement generally do not differ despite varying categories or reasons for solitary confinement placement. Whether housed in a prison, jail or detention facility incarcerated persons are treated the same regardless of the offense committed or reason given for being placed in restrictive housing.

Prisoners may be placed in disciplinary or punitive solitary confinement as punishment for violating minor rules as determined by each individual facility, filing grievances or lawsuits, or for annoying correctional officers. In most instances, prisoners in disciplinary segregation do not pose such an extreme management challenge that warrants solitary confinement. In other instances, prisoners may be placed indefinitely in solitary confinement for their “protection” if the prisoner is perceived as vulnerable. Although isolated for a “good” reason, the impact is still terribly detrimental to the person.

The Coalition on Solitary Confinement in Virginia

The coalition is a group of advocates, directly impacted individuals, and nonprofit organizations including Interfaith Action for Human Rights, the ACLU of Virginia, and Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy.

The coalition asked Governor Northam to immediately voice support for legislation that ends the practice of confining people to a cell for 20 or more hours a day and to work with lawmakers to pass the legislation in the next General Assembly session. Additionally, the coalition asked Governor Northam to conduct an independent investigation into VDOC's claims of ending its use of "restrictive housing."

[Letter to Governor Northam: Coalition to Gov. Northam: End Solitary Confinement | ACLU of Virginia \(acluva.org\)](https://www.acluva.org/letter-to-governor-northam-coalition-to-gov-northam-end-solitary-confinement)

Mental Health Impact

Most experts believe that many in our prisons have serious mental health challenges and probably should be getting mental health support rather than being imprisoned.

The Virginia Department of Corrections reported that 26 percent of prisoners have mental health issues. Prisoners in solitary confinement are diagnosed with a range of disorders such bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder because of abuse, manic depression, and schizophrenia amid other mental illnesses.

Not only do many who enter solitary confinement already have mental health issues, inmates who experience isolation are considerably more likely to develop mental health issues than those in the general prison population. As those of us who experienced lockdown under COVID-19 understand, we all need and crave human contact. The society is seeing a huge surge in mental health problems from people isolating during the pandemic. Imagine the impact of complete isolation.

Fiscal Impact

According to the National experts and reports it costs approximately \$75,000 per prisoner per year to keep someone in solitary confinement compared to housing in a regular population setting. Despite this high cost per prisoner, there is little or no evidence that shows that solitary confinement makes prisons safer and in fact, these conditions, may be more of a threat to the commonwealth public safety.

The Solution

Solitary confinement should be prohibited except in rare circumstances — such as when a prisoner poses a real and imminent threat of physical harm — and only for as little time as necessary. VICPP is supporting legislation to limit Virginia's excessive use of solitary confinement. This legislation will make the Commonwealth safer and more just by demanding that Virginia prisons and jails consider humane alternatives before implementing a dehumanizing and barbaric practice that is known to exacerbate and even cause serious mental illness.

Plan a Solitary Solidarity Action

What is a Solitary Solidarity Action? A Solitary Solidarity Action gives participants and viewers a quick visual sense of what it is like to live in a solitary cell.

What are the purposes of the Solitary Solidarity Action? The action is designed to:

- Help people understand how awful it is to be locked in a cell alone for long periods of time.
- Offer advocacy opportunities accompanying the “experience.”
- Generate media coverage about the need to abolish the use of solitary confinement in Virginia.

What happens? You set up a mock cell situation and ask people to sit inside it, alone, for a few minutes. A typical solitary confinement cell is 6’ x 10’. On a college campus, you can build a mock cell in the center of the campus where lots of people pass by. At your congregation, you can use a parking space, which is about the proper dimensions. Set up a cot (if easily available) a chair and a bucket to simulate a toilet.

Walls: Walls can be simple or more elaborate. Parking cones can mark the edges, or you could build a cell with pipe, wire fencing, boxes, or office dividers. Use your creativity to design the walls of the cell.

Sounds: You can play the sounds a prisoner might hear. (Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2Pg2HAvnAE>)

Virtual: Some groups have arranged for folks to wear virtual glasses that allow them to send the inside of a solitary confinement cell. Virtual glasses into which cellphones are inserted that download the sounds and views can be purchased for approximately \$25.

When: Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy (VICPP) is asking groups to plan their Solitary Solidarity Actions in October (although late September or early November would be fine too). Please let VICPP know when and where you action is planned.

How long should it last? The action can be short, like 30 minutes after a worship service with everyone standing in it for just a minute, or it can be spread out over a week on campus with students signing up for hour-long shifts inside the “cell.”

Advocacy Actions: Advocacy opportunities should accompany the mock cell opportunity. Set up a table and encourage people to take actions. They can:

- Sign the VICPP petition against solitary confinement, and someone should mail it into VICPP and VICPP will deliver the petitions to legislators.
- Sign the online petition.
- Write a letter to legislators. You will need to help people identify who their elected state legislators are. Be sure to mail these.

Prayer Options: Congregations, seminaries, and campus ministries will want to include a prayer/worship component with the action. You can develop your own service/litany, or you can use the litany created by VICPP. A copy is included with this toolkit.

Additional Resources from VICPP:

- Testimonials from people who have been in solitary confinement. You can show these testimonials via video or read written statements.
- Petition for use at a table (Link: [End Solitary Confinement in Virginia | Virginia Interfaith Center PowerBase \(ourpowerbase.net\)](#))
- Fact sheets on Solitary Confinement
- Solitary Confinement Litany
- Sample media release (ahead of time)
- Sample media release (after the event)

Generate media about the Solitary Solidarity Action. Media helps the message reach more people. As you plan your action, plan how you can generate media coverage. You can:

- Email, mail or deliver a press release to area media a few days before the event. Use the sample media release as a template.
- Take photos of your event and send a follow-up release to the media (if they media doesn't come to your event).
- Ask each person who participates to post about it on social media and include a link to the online petition.
- Ask the editorial writers of your local papers to write editorials on the issue.
- Let Jamar Boyd at VICPP know about your planned event, so VICPP can help promote it. Email Jamar@virginiainterfaithcenter.org.



Remembering Those Incarcerated: An End to Solitary Confinement Litany

Leader: We, residents of the nation’s oldest Commonwealth, have witnessed the failure of our justice system and the inhumane treatment of our neighbors.

All: Forgive us, we pray.

Leader: Our apathy, complicity, and silence have prolonged evil causing those around us to suffered plights of great harm.

All: Forgive us, we pray.

Leader: The practice of solitary confinement is one of torture unbecoming of a nation founded upon all people having fundamental rights, such as liberty, free speech, freedom of religion, due process of law, and freedom of assembly.

All: Forgive us, we pray.

Leader: For those who suffer in Virginia’s correctional facilities and the many stories we do not know, remind us of Your presence.

All: We beseech You, Eternal Spirit.

Leader: For the more than 7,000 people incarcerated in Virginia prisons who were placed in solitary confinement units known as “restrictive housing” at some point between July 1, 2018, and June 30, 2019, and the hundreds currently suffering, remind them of Your presence.

All: We beseech You, Eternal Spirit.

Leader: For those who have endured like Tyquine Lee and bear the scars of bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder because of abuse, manic depression, and schizophrenia amid other mental illnesses, remind them of Your presence.

All: We beseech You, Eternal Spirit.

Leader: As people of faith and goodwill we ask for your mercy upon those incarcerated, relegated to isolation and torture, and often forgotten.

All: Lord, have mercy upon them

Leader: Holy God, we see those in solitary confinement as our brothers and sisters needing our earnest prayers. May our cries and pleas spiritually loosen the chains of their bondage.

All: Lord, have mercy upon them

Leader: Divine Spirit, creator of all humanity, help those in isolation to know that there are those advocating on their behalf and determined to make justice a reality.

All: Lord, have mercy upon them

Leader: We stand for the common good of humanity calling for the end to solitary confinement in all of Virginia's correctional facilities.

All: Holy One, grant us strength and courage.

Leader: We believe solitary confinement is itself a form of violence and torture that leads to irreversible harm, mental health issues, and potential death. We call upon our elected officials to seek justice and correct oppression.

All: Holy One, grant us strength and courage.

Leader: Hebrews 13:3 admonishes us to, "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated," and we stand committed to freeing our neighbors from the barbaric practice of solitary confinement.

All: Holy One, grant us strength and courage. Amen.

Virginia Clergy Against Solitary Confinement

We, the undersigned Virginia clergy, call for the end to solitary confinement in all Virginia Correctional Facilities.

According to the Virginia Department of Corrections' own numbers, more than 7,000 people incarcerated in Virginia prisons were placed in solitary confinement units known as "restrictive housing" at some point between July 1, 2018, and June 30, 2019. This number does not include people placed in solitary confinement conditions throughout Virginia prisons, let alone Virginia jails or juvenile detention facilities.

Solitary confinement is a form of torture. Undeniably the practice of solitary confinement leads to a host of collateral consequences that will often extend the amount of time prisoners will spend incarcerated and risk their lives as they endure the well-known psychological stress of isolation. The traumatic impacts of solitary confinement are far-reaching, and any time spent in solitary increases the likelihood that a person will die prematurely after their release from incarceration.

Many in our prisons need mental health care. The Virginia Department of Corrections reported that 26 percent of prisoners have mental health issues. Prisoners in solitary confinement are diagnosed with a range of disorders such bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder because of abuse, manic depression, and schizophrenia amid other mental illnesses. Such detrimental outcomes can and should be avoided.

Consider the story of Tyquine Lee 28, who spent more than 600 days in solitary at Red Onion prison in Virginia from 2016 to 2018. Inmates who experience isolation are considerably more likely to develop mental health issues than those in the general prison population. Which of us wouldn't develop mental health issues if we were in solitary for 600 days?

It is unacceptable to criminalize and imprison people suffering from significant mental illness, addiction, and the impacts of poverty. It is equally wrong for our prison system to cause mental health issues. We, the undersigned, firmly believe that solitary confinement is itself a form of violence and torture. We call on you, the Virginia General Assembly, to follow the example of states such as New Mexico, Colorado, Maine, and New York and end solitary confinement in Virginia.

Hebrews 13:3 admonishes us to, "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated," and today we urge you to do the same.

FACT SHEET



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Solitary Confinement in Virginia

The Problem: According to the Virginia Department of Corrections' own numbers, more than 7,000 people incarcerated in Virginia prisons were placed in solitary confinement units known as "restrictive housing" at some point between July 1, 2018, and June 30, 2019. That number does not include people placed in solitary confinement conditions through other types of housing units in Virginia prisons, let alone Virginia jails or juvenile detention facilities.

What is Solitary Confinement: Solitary confinement is the isolation of a person in a jail or prison cell for all or nearly all day with little environmental stimulation or opportunity for human interaction. Solitary confinement in Virginia is considered 20 hours per day in isolation away from the rest of the prison population for adults, and 17 hours a day for juvenile offenders.

Solitary Confinement in Virginia: Tyquine Lee, 28, spent over 600 days in solitary at Red Onion prison in Virginia from 2016 to 2018. Red Onion is a supermax prison treated as an "end of the line" facility within the penal system. While HB1642/SB1777 was signed into law in April 2019, requiring the Department of Corrections (VADOC) to report certain data related to its use of isolated confinement each year, there are still discrepancies in reporting use of isolation.

The Solution: Solitary confinement should be prohibited except in rare circumstances — such as when a prisoner poses a real and imminent threat of physical harm — and only for as little time as necessary. This legislation will make the Commonwealth safer and more just by demanding that Virginia prisons and jails consider humane alternatives before implementing a dehumanizing and barbaric practice that is known to exacerbate and even cause serious mental illness.

Mental Health Impact: Inmates who experience isolation are considerably more likely to develop mental health issues than those in the general prison population. The Virginia Department of Corrections reported that 26% of prisoners have mental health issues. Prisoners in solitary confinement are diagnosed with a range of disorders such as bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder because of abuse, manic depression, and schizophrenia amid other mental illnesses.

Financial Impact: According to the National estimate the cost is \$75,000 per prisoner in solitary confinement. Despite this high cost, per prisoner, there is little or no evidence that shows that solitary confinement makes prisons safer and in fact, these conditions, may be more of a threat to the commonwealth public safety.

State Changes: New Jersey has restricted 'isolated confinement' to no more than 20 days and only for people between the ages of 21 and 65 last year. It also bans solitary confinement for pregnant, postpartum, serious medical and or psychological conditions, and members of the LGBTQ community. Recreational and rehabilitative interventions during the short time when inmates in solitary confinement are let out of their cells are required.

New York passed The Humane Alternatives to Long-Term Solitary Confinement Act (HALT) bans the use of solitary for those with mental or physical disabilities, people aged under 21 or over 55, and pregnant or post-partum women. The new law restricts prisons and jails from holding people in solitary confinement for more than 15 consecutive days.

Sources: ACLU of Virginia, Business Insider, Interfaith Action for Human Rights, Prison Policy Initiative, Silent Injustice: Solitary Confinement in Virginia, Mental Health Institution - Virginia Department of Corrections, The New York Times