

JRC

Justice Reform Consortium



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A Solitary Truth

Submitted by Jean Basinger

There is currently an increasing concern regarding the overuse of administrative segregation or "solitary confinement" in U.S. Prisons. I would like to share with you information sent to me by an Iowa prisoner regarding how he survived the experience of being in an isolation cell on the Critical Care Unit for 360 days. The CCU was originally built for mentally ill inmates, but now several of the isolation pods are being used for those serving disciplinary detention. I share this with his permission; however, have chosen not to include his name.

Here is his story.

"I wrote this the last time I was 180 days into a stay on the C.C.U. (Critical Care Unit) in an isolation cell on Pod A. I hate to admit it, but I was having to struggle to maintain clarity. They were on the verge of "winning." What follows became my personal anthem for the following 180 days. I would read it, say it aloud, and eventually when things were really tough, I would scream it.

"I never let them win. I never took medication. I never asked for a time cut, I never became complacent and I never stopped caring and fighting for those around me who were having a more difficult time.

"One of the most recited lines by "staff" was, "_____, why are you getting involved? This doesn't have anything to do with you."

"Each time they said that I felt a little better. I realize that there are people who have done much more solitary time than I ever have and every time I was there I would think of them, and I would think about how strong I believed my mind to be how I never caved in under the pressures of prison, even as a teen, when there were things I had to fight against everyday that were like a nightmare.

"Solitary is torture and I take pride in the fact that Iowa knew that upon my re-entry to the yard from solitary I had absolutely zero fear of returning for the long haul.

“All prisons have the same mantra for staff, "we, teamwork, etc." And the most important mission they must complete is the destruction of the words "we, teamwork" from the prisoner population.

“We never got outside and when we would crawl like little monkeys onto the very painful ledge of that high window (in the exercise cell) they would cancel our rec time.

I exercise against a resistance that will never tire.
adding fuel to this fire that is indignation,
self righteous inflammation of pride,
with just cause
this constant affront to our meager portion of decency necessary for psychological self preservation is a welcome
confrontation for those willing to combat indifference and conformity to this sloth-like existence,
using knowledge to break free,
if only figuratively,
forcing these intervals into insanity to be only temporary,
holding fast to clarity,
I am free!"

Here is a link to a New York Times article: [The Abuse of Solitary Confinement](#)

And, From the Sentencing Project:

Exonerated Prisoners Testify on Solitary Confinement

Death row exoneree Anthony Graves testified last week at the first-ever congressional hearing on solitary confinement. Graves spent 12 years in solitary confinement during the 18 years he was incarcerated in Texas prisons for a murder he didn't commit. He testified to the horrors of his experience of extreme isolation: "Solitary confinement makes our criminal justice system criminal... It dehumanizes us all."



The Innocence Project also submitted testimony from six of the many exonerated people who spent time in solitary confinement. Julie Rea, of Illinois, described being tormented by guards playing an audio cassette of a woman being tortured; Nick Yarris, of Pennsylvania's death row, tells of his own suicide attempt during his 23 years in solitary confinement; and Clarence Elkins described feeling numb while being released because he had endured three months of solitary confinement just before his exoneration.

"When you're confined with no ability to read, to exercise, to receive basic medical attention or to develop your mind, it's just inhumane. I saw some people snap. They just lost their sanity," said Herman Atkins in the written testimony. "As a nation, we must do better. When a government has the authority to treat people so poorly, it's impossible to hold citizens to a higher standard." Atkins was wrongfully imprisoned for over 11 years in California before being exonerated by DNA evidence.

[Read the complete testimony.](#)

Iowa's Horrible Turnaround on Ex-felon Voting Rights

We became complacent. During the years prior to Terry Branstad's move back into the Iowa Governor's Office, we should have been making permanent changes to Iowa's law on the restoration of ex-felon voting rights. We didn't.

When Governor Tom Vilsack issued Executive Order No. 42 on July 4, 2005, ex-offenders in Iowa were given the right to vote and hold office, providing they had completed their court-imposed sentences. Governor Chet Culver continued the process. Then, overnight, Governor Terry Edward Branstad turned the process over completely.

A recent Associated Press article [Foley, Ryan J., *Few Iowa felons pursue voting rights*. Des Moines Register; June 24, 2012] reports that Governor "Branstad has made Iowa one of the most difficult states in the nation for felons to vote, with an executive order he issued last year already having disenfranchised thousands of people."

www.desmoinesregister.com/viewart/20120624/NEWS/306240062/Few-Iowa-felons-pursue-voting-rights

A University of Pennsylvania white paper matches "discharge records to the Iowa voter file," and found that "ex-felon turnout substantially increased following Executive Order 42." One figure estimates this increase to be as much as "four to eight percentage points."

<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~marcmere/workingpapers/IowaFelons.pdf>

So if ex-offenders are turning out to vote in substantial numbers, why is Governor Branstad making it more difficult for them to vote? Didn't he and a tsunami of Republicans take office with the help of those votes from ex-offenders? There is no scientific connection, but it makes you wonder, doesn't it.

The 7th anniversary of Governor Vilsack's executive order is this upcoming Independence Day, July 4 (Wednesday). We're asking you to write a letter-to-the editor of your local newspaper and describe the problems you see with disenfranchisement of ex-felons.

Here are a few resources:

Guidelines for the Des Moines Register on letter writing:

www.desmoinesregister.com/viewint/article/99999999/HELP/40507010/Submit-Letter-Editor

The June 24th AP article in the Des Moines Register:

www.desmoinesregister.com/viewart/20120624/NEWS/306240062/Few-Iowa-felons-pursue-voting-rights And the same article on FOX: www.foxnews.com/us/2012/06/24/apnewsbreak-few-iowa-felons-pursue-voting-rights

University of Pennsylvania white paper by Marc Meredith and Michael Morse:

<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~marcmere/workingpapers/IowaFelons.pdf>

The Brennan Center's documentation of everything from Vilsack's Executive Order No. 42 and Branstad's Executive Order No. 70, signed the same day he took his oath of office.

www.brennancenter.org/content/pages/voting_rights_restoration_efforts_in_iowa

ACLU-Iowa's a new flier explaining Iowa's new procedure under Branstad for an ex-felon to have citizenship restored (it includes a credit check): www.aclu-ia.org/voting-rights-when-you-have-a-criminal-background



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**** Important article regarding our work on outlawing shackling**

http://www.alternet.org/newsandviews/article/1002664/former_inmate_speaks_out%2C_sues_for_being_shackled_while_in_labor?page=entire#.TBRt1YoGUc.email

UPCOMING EVENTS

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The next **Friends of Iowa Women Prisoners** meeting is at noon on **Tues., July 17** at Wesley United Methodist Church, 800 East 12th.

Bring your lunch. The place and time are consistent throughout the year. The meetings are always held on the third Tuesday of the month, and always held from noon to 1:00 pm at Wesley United Methodist Church located at 800 East 12th Street in Des Moines. The location is a block west of East High School. Please contact [Vi](#) for more information.

In July, Kim Gunnes will share the programs offered at ICIW by Planned Parenthood.

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Voices to be Heard is a support group for families and children of an incarcerated loved one. The group gathers to support and comfort those who know too well the grief that comes to those left behind when someone they love is incarcerated. The group meets on the first and third Tuesdays of the month at Union Park Methodist Church (East 12th & Guthrie in Des Moines) from 5:30 – 7:00 p.m. The group brings in speakers, performs outreach, provide support groups and leadership classes. The next meeting is scheduled for July 3rd. Contact [Sue](#) for more information.



Justice Reform Consortium member organizations: Iowa CURE & Iowa Coalition 4 Juvenile Justice; Friends of Iowa Women Prisoners; Trinity United Methodist Church; Methodist Federation for Social Action; Voices to be Heard; ACLU of Iowa; Social Action Committee, Des Moines Presbytery; Des Moines Chapter of WILPF; American Friends Service Committee; Plymouth Congregational Church, Board of Christian Social Action; Iowa Annual Conference, UMC; Iowa NOW and Des Moines NOW; National Association of Social Workers; Beacon of Life

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