

Members of the Criminal Justice and Public safety Committee,

My name is Brandon S. Brown, and I currently reside in Gilead, Maine. One-hundred and thirteen days ago I was released from the Bolduc Correctional Facility on the Supervised Community Confinement Program, after spending more than twelve years behind the walls of Maine's correctional facilities. I am submitting this testimony today because I have personally seen the extremely detrimental effects of segregation, solitary confinement, and isolation on my brothers inside of those walls, and since returning to Maine communities I have heard dozens of stories from men and women who have also spoken to their experience being confined to a cell for entire days, weeks, months, and tragically, sometimes even years. I am here to beg that you pass LD 696, the legislation aimed at banning these practices because it is not only morally the right thing to do, it is also imperative to keep our communities safe. I want to be clear that when I say "our communities" I am speaking about every resident of Maine who walks these streets, fields, and woods freely, but I am also speaking about our incarcerated population, who, no matter how much we may want to deny it, are our brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, friends, and so much more. Passing this legislation is the humane thing to do.

During my time at the Maine State Prison specifically, I witnessed the effects of isolation on hundreds of men in my incarcerated community. The deprivation that these men experienced, the sense of loneliness and isolation, and the hopelessness that was instilled within them from these practices had extremely negative lasting effects on the culture of the prison. I can't possibly ask you to imagine what people in these circumstances experience, because no matter how hard you try you would never understand the toll that solitary confinement takes on your body, mind, and spirit. I would never ask you to imagine this because even imagining it would be a willful exercise in traumatizing yourself, and one that would burden you with an ugly side of the world that no person should witness. These practices do not accomplish any positive outcome, ever.

The effects of isolation are well researched and well documented; it fosters antisocial attitudes and beliefs, it traumatizes individuals and puts them in a state of hyper-sensitivity once transitioning out of those conditions, and the list goes on. We live under the façade that wrongdoers must be dealt with harshly despite the fact that we all know extreme forms of punishment do not result in transformative change. In the prison system, we subscribe to the belief that isolating someone is the way to keep others safe—this is a tragically misguided belief. These forms of punishment only exacerbate the very resentments that cause people to lash out. Segregation practices that involve extreme forms of isolation only worsen the mental health of those who have caused harm, harm that most typically results from pre-existing mental health issues. We isolate people, treat them less than human, offer them little-to-no therapy, programming, or treatment, and cut them off from physical movement that the body needs to function as well as community that the heart needs to flourish, and then we ask them to "behave", or "be better" when we release them from these harsh practices and back into the prison community.

What we must truly ask ourselves, what I beg each of you to ask yourself, is why we would hold on to a practice that is not working? Why would we continue to wear the veil of ignorance that solitary confinement or any practices that isolate people for extended periods of time is somehow helpful? And, finally, if it was your son or your daughter who found themselves in this environment, what would you want the system to do when responding to incidents that currently lead to these practices? If you are honest with yourselves, the unequivocal answer is that you would hope the system responds in a way that fosters growth, addresses harm, and equips your loved one with the tools necessary to respond to the situations that led them to segregation in a more healthy and less harmful way. This legislation must pass.

Do not fool yourselves into believing that we are asking for an end to accountability, separation, and even a level of punishment in response to harm. To do so would be to willfully engage in ignorance. What we are requesting of this committee and this legislature is that we create healthy and evidence-based responses to harm and rule-breaking within the department of corrections, because only by doing so will we release the 90+ percent of prisoners back into our communities less traumatized and more equip to deal with the struggles of everyday life. A prison system that believes harsh punishment, trauma, and isolation are an adequate response to wrongdoing is a severely misguided one. Help us fix this system because your constituents deserve it, and because it is the only option that may return the humanity to our system.

Thank you for your time,
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