

April 5, 2021

Dear Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren, and Honorable Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee Members,

My name is Steven Clark. I would like to provide testimony for LD 696. I am an incarcerated citizen at Maine State Prison. I am certified as a substance abuse and mental health rehabilitation technician, and a recovery coach. I am currently in my third semester of graduate school studying psychology. I spent my first semester researching mental health, peer support, and the harmful affects of imprisonment and segregation.

Over the past nine years the prison has allowed me to mentor, facilitate, and coach men at the prison including men in segregation. None of the men I met were violent monsters or unredeemable. None were so out of control or violent that they should be locked in a small six by eight room for 23 to 24 hours a day. Each of these men were looking for the same thing, connection and healing. All had experienced significant trauma in their lives. They needed love, human connection and support.

In solitary confinement men became paranoid. They were overwhelmed with stress, lost self-esteem, and participated in self harm or became suicidal.

They are placed in small cells often with nothing, not even a book. In some cases the cells are unsanitary covered in blood and bodily fluids. An older gentleman who I live with in the honor pod returned to the prison following a medical procedure and was required to quarantine in the segregation unit due to Covid protocol. He was placed in a cell with feces on the walls, still in the toilet, and blood on the door of his cell. He requested cleaning products but was not given any until the next day.

The conditions of segregation would put an animal shelter out of business. Men are stressed and asking for help, but services in segregation are lacking. It is common for mental health professionals to miss appointments. A man sits all week waiting to see someone who doesn't show. They feel, let down and angry.

Many guards are professional and compassionate. But, several others are abusive and enjoy provoking inmates. For example, refusing to provide toilet paper or banging on the doors to wake men up during night rounds. When a human is stressed blood flows out of the part of the brain that is responsible for thinking straight. A human goes into flight, fight, and freeze. Men in segregation are dealing with the stress response at all times.

If you put a plant in the dark, give it no sunlight, and nutrients it does not grow. Humans are similarly heliotropic in nature, our ability to evolve requires positivity and a stable environment. Segregation creates an environment of digression and instability.

Segregation is a powerful example of warehousing human beings. We are taking broken people, placing them in segregation, separating them from love and connection, from positivity. We over medicate them, provide them very minimal services, then release them with no supports, a disaster.

The prison system has a 66 percent recidivism rate within 3 years of release. Segregation is part of that challenge. We are locking someone up who has experienced a great deal of abuse and trauma in their lives and creating more.

Despite the research findings, the evidence regarding the harmful consequences of being isolated in a small room with very little positive stimulation, my last attempt to mentor a young man in the segregation unit named Zach was rebuffed. I was told his behaviors did not match up with me being able to go down and support him, he had to behave first. I asked the unit manager, "When we are struggling isn't that when we need the most support in our lives?" The response, "I don't know what to tell you."

By supporting an end to segregation, you are supporting the wellbeing of human beings. You are supporting the end to unnecessary suffering, and you are creating a safer Maine community.

Sincerely yours,
Steven Clark
Maine State Prison