

Ray Levasseur
Waldo
LD 696

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Waldo, Maine 04915

Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren and members of the Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee.

Greetings. My name is Ray Luc Levasseur and I offer the following testimony re: LD 696 for your consideration.

I was imprisoned for 20 years, 13 years of it in solitary confinement including 10 consecutive years at USP-Marion (the flagship prison that set the national model for "supermax" facilities) and ADX (Administrative Maximum), the FBOP's current extreme isolation prison. At one point I was also held for 6 months in the Maine State Prison segregation unit. None of these placements in solitary was for "disciplinary" reasons - they were classified as "administrative" placements under the guise of "special management."

State DOC's and the FBOP have determined that to keep a lid on decades of mass incarceration includes the widespread use and abuse of solitary confinement as a "management tool." In the 17 years since my prison release, I've worked with the National Jericho Movement and other groups to put a stop to the use of solitary confinement and to mitigate its effects on those held in its grip.

During my years in solitary, I experienced and witnessed what extreme isolation, psychological torture, and a multitude of other abuses does to human beings. However, the purpose of my testimony today is not to try and shock you with horror stories, but rather to appeal to your reason, morality and position as lawmakers to end the practice.

In 2009 I wrote a bill introduced to the 124th session of this legislature (LD 1611), introduced by Rep. Jim Schatz. This bill sought to restrict the amount of time a person was held in solitary, prohibit solitary for those with mental illness, prohibit the use of corporal punishment, prohibit the use of the "restraint chair" and chemical agents, and provide due process protections for those placed in solitary. This bill received wide support and media attention but failed to pass. What did pass was a "Resolve" which established a "working group" to examine issues raised by LD 1611, and for that group to submit a final report to the CJPS committee. The group's report included recommendations that could reduce the numbers of those held in solitary.

When a new DOC commissioner replaced the previous one, these recommendations were acted upon, which led to a significant reduction in the use of solitary. And that led to a significant reduction of the collateral damage that accompanies solitary - less cell extractions and beatings, less use of chemical agents, less use of the restraint chair, less self-harm.

But after that DOC commissioner left and was replaced by others, a slow but steady backsliding began, which is the situation we must face today. As long as the use of solitary confinement is based on policy and not on law, it's subject to manipulation by whoever heads the DOC.

One cannot hide the very real human rights violation that is solitary confinement behind language that obfuscates and sanitizes: "residents," "best practices," "progressive" as used in the DOC commissioner's testimony to this committee. These words mean nothing unless the reality is changed. As lawmakers, you are in the unique position to make this change happen. Reject complicity. Act now to end the abomination of solitary confinement.

Thank you.
Ray Luc Levasseur