

VIRGINIA COALITION ON

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

#solitaryNOmoreVA

July 26, 2021

The Honorable Ralph Northam
Governor, Commonwealth of Virginia
1111 East Broad Street
Richmond, VA 23219

Dear Governor Northam,

The Virginia Department of Corrections (VDOC) recently announced that it has eliminated its use of “restrictive housing” for the past 18 months in all its facilities. “Restrictive housing” is defined by the American Correctional Association (ACA) as the confinement of a person to a cell for 20 or more hours per day, but the practice is more commonly known as solitary confinement. The Virginia Coalition on Solitary Confinement – a group of advocates, directly impacted individuals, and nonprofit organizations including Interfaith Action for Human Rights and the ACLU of Virginia – disputes VDOC’s claim and asks you to take immediate action to end the inhumane practice of solitary confinement.

The realities of solitary confinement in Virginia are a far cry from VDOC’s alleged restorative approach.

Members of our coalition have been in direct contact with at least a dozen people who have been held in solitary confinement during the last 18 months – all of whom were held for more than 20 hours a day in an isolated cell. Multiple reports allege that correctional officers only release people from their cell for showers. When outdoor time is granted, it simply means moving people from a small box to a small cage with no opportunities to interact with other people. At best, VDOC’s new policy of four hours or more outside of isolation is applied arbitrarily. Many of them were told their solitary confinement was retaliation for speaking publicly about prison conditions or filing a lawsuit against VDOC for unconstitutional treatment. To protect their safety, we will not disclose names or identifying information. Because VDOC uses euphemistic language to describe the practice of solitary confinement, we do not have accurate information on how many others are being held under these inhumane conditions.

Solitary confinement causes and exacerbates mental illness. For people with pre-existing mental illness, solitary confinement often causes significant and rapid deterioration. [Numerous studies](#) confirm that prolonged isolation deprives people of the basic mental and emotional capacity to function, with effects that become noticeable after as little as ten days of involuntary solitary confinement.

VDOC has made similar claims in the past. In January 2019, [public reporting](#) shows that VDOC announced an end to its use of “restrictive housing” in a now unavailable press release. Additionally, VDOC has provided no detailed information on its new “restorative housing” program – a term which, given VDOC’s history of human rights abuses, is insulting to those who have suffered and continue to suffer the brutality of solitary confinement. The Coalition has serious concerns that “restorative housing” is a smoke screen and a simple rebranding of the same practices.

We ask you to immediately voice your support for legislation that ends the practice of confining people to a cell for 20 or more hours a day and work with lawmakers to pass the legislation in the next General Assembly session. Additionally, we ask you to conduct an independent investigation into VDOC’s claims of ending its use of “restrictive housing.” Without an independent investigation, there is no way to confirm that these policy changes are being applied consistently across all VDOC facilities.

If you would like to speak to the Coalition on this issue, please reach out to Natasha White, Coalition Coordinator, at vacoalitioncoordinator@gmail.com or (318) 295-5343.

Sincerely,

The Virginia Coalition on Solitary Confinement

ACLU of Virginia

ACLU People Power Fairfax

Bridging The Gap In Virginia

Charlottesville Chapter National

Organization for Women

Citizens for Prison Reform/Open MI

Door campaign - Michigan

Coalition for Justice

The Humanization Project

Inmate Support Virginia

Interfaith Action for Human Rights (IAHR)

Just Future Project

NAACP Loudoun

National Association of Social Workers,

Virginia Chapter

Resource Information Help for the

Disadvantaged and Disenfranchised (RIHD)

SALT-Social Action Linking Together

Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry
of Virginia

Virginia Defenders for Freedom, Justice
& Equality

Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy

Virginia Justice Democrats

Virginia Justice for Life

Virginia Organizing

Virginia Prisoner Of Conscience

Virginia Prison Justice Network

Virginia Prisons Accountability Committee

WJCC Coalition for Community Justice

CC: Brian Moran, Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security

Harold Clarke, Director of Virginia Department of Corrections