

By Town ▾ By Topic ▾ Art & Culture ▾ Opinion ▾ About Subscribe

Write Us



Credit: Google Map Data, 2021

## Legislation and Lawsuit Take Aim At Solitary Confinement in Connecticut Prisons

BY EMILIA OTTE · MARCH 2, 2021

Correction Officers [say](#) that they need tools like solitary confinement to maintain their control over inmates — and there are cases where Kevnesha Boyd agrees this is true — but only, she says, because the culture of the state's Department of Correction emphasizes the use of force over rehabilitation.

Boyd, a counselor who worked in the state's Department of Correction for four years, says the things she witnessed handling intake at New Haven Correctional Center ultimately drove her to leave her job.

"It started to eat me up, because it's just like traumatic event after traumatic event," she said.

Boyd, who now sits on the board of [Stop Solitary: Connecticut](#), said she started having visions of violence.

TOP

She also cited the frustration she felt with trying to help individuals who were being placed in solitary confinement. Boyd said that the vast majority of the individuals she interviewed on intake reported having experienced some kind of trauma. And, she said, solitary itself could cause psychosis.

.....

“It started to eat me up, because it’s just like traumatic event after traumatic event,” she said.

.....

Solitary, she says, is overused as punishment, and it places inmates in conditions in which they lived “like savages.”

Boyd says the conditions of solitary confinement heap trauma on top of trauma, forcing her, as a counselor, to deal with helping prisoners survive in the moment, rather than treating their underlying mental health issues.

“Nothing good comes out of solitary confinement,” said Boyd.

In an effort to address the issue, State Sen. Gary Winfield, D-New Haven, has proposed a bill called the PROTECT Act that would limit the use of isolated confinement and restraints, and would forbid the use of solitary on individuals with a diagnosed mental health condition.

## Trauma in the workplace

Department of Correction staff say that the stress of their work, and the violence that they witness, leaves them with their own mental health struggles.

In recognition of this, Winfield’s bill adds correction officers to the list of professions granted worker’s compensation benefits for mental health treatment.

.....

“It may not affect you tomorrow, but you know what? It’s going to hit you at some point –this isn’t what normal people see in the world,” said Sean Howard, president of AFSCME Local 387.

.....



Winfield's bill also requires department employees take trauma-recognition training, and are equipped with ways to deal with their own trauma.

In interviews with CT Examiner, correction officers described how working in these facilities has affected their own mental health. One described having to handcuff a prisoner who had "his head split open;" another witnessed a fellow officer nearly die after being stabbed in the neck with a pen.

"It may not affect you tomorrow, but you know what? It's going to hit you at some point –this isn't what normal people see in the world," said Sean Howard, president of AFSCME Local 387.

"I've walked into a cell and an inmate's hanging and I have to cut that person down and then do CPR on that person," said Mike Vargo, President of Local 1565. "That's not easy. I have to come home to my family after that."

## A traumatic experience for families

Trauma that occurs within the prisons can easily break through the facilities' walls to affect family members and loved ones of the inmates.

Raisha Bivens, a social worker and member of the board of Stop Solitary, said at a press conference that her brother, Joshua, was placed in restrictive housing after getting into a fight with a cellmate and threatening a corrections officer.

Both actions, she said, were the result of auditory hallucinations that were part of his schizophrenia.

"Learning that he was confined in his cell more than 21 hours per day — there were many nights where I was afraid — was he going to survive, was he going to make it?"

Bivens said that her brother became obese and insulin-dependent in prison, until she was finally able to get his bond lowered and bring him to a treatment center where, she said, he was able to go off insulin in two weeks.

Colleen Lord, mother of Carl Talbot, known to his family as "Robby," spoke at another press conference about the death of her son. Talbot died at New Haven Correctional Facility after being placed in 5-point restraints and sprayed with pepper spray.

According to his mother, the pepper spray was so strong that it affected the EMT workers who came to collect Talbot's body two hours later.

Lord said her son had died "in great pain and injustice," and added that Winfield's bill would require that individuals responsible for the mistreatment of prisoners be held accountable for their actions.

"The PROTECT Act would have saved Robby from this horrifying homicide," she said.

## A lawsuit

Correction officers, prisoners and family members alike recount the negative effects that Connecticut's prison system has had on their mental health, and the lack of tools provided to cope with it.

This may be particularly true for individuals placed in isolated confinement despite having been diagnosed with a serious mental illness prior to being placed in restrictive housing.

The nonprofit [Disability Rights Connecticut](#) has filed a lawsuit on behalf of three individuals — 26-year-old Kyle Lamar Paschal-Barros, 34-year-old Kezlyn Méndez and 29-year-old Tyrone Spence — demanding that people with mental illness no longer be subjected to prolonged periods of isolation or in-cell restrain.

Spence, Méndez and Paschal-Barros all have experienced solitary confinement and being restrained for long periods of time. The lawsuit also alleges that all three were diagnosed with mental health conditions before entering the prison system. Their diagnoses include ADHD, PTSD, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, anxiety and depression. All three men engaged in self-harm, and each attempted suicide at least once while in custody, according papers filed with the courts.

The lawsuit describes the conditions when Mendez allegedly suffered “physical and sexual abuse” at the hands of correction officers, and that both he and Paschal-Barros were stripped naked except for a jumper or “safety gown” and left in cold cells.

The lawsuit further alleges that Paschal-Barros was “forced to dump his food onto wax paper on the floor and eat like a dog” after being shackled in his cell, and that “staff sometimes compounded his distress by playing continuous bell sounds over the intercom into the strip cell.”

The time the three men spent in Northern Correctional Facility, the lawsuit alleges, left the men with ongoing mental health problems, most notably severe anxiety manifested as recurring nightmares, paranoia and suicidal thoughts.

## Treatment

In Boyd's view, the department should focus on providing prisoners with the tools to cope with traumas they experienced before even entering the prison system.

When Boyd worked at New Haven Correctional Center, there were two psychologists working her shift, which she said didn't give her enough time to complete thorough evaluations of people brought into the facility.

According to Boyd, prisoners could benefit from a lot more mental health intervention than they were given.

“People forget that being incarcerated is the punishment,” said Boyd. “Everything after that is supposed to be geared towards rehabilitation and treatment.”

“I might get to see you once every two weeks, and that’s a stretch,” she said. “Most people incarcerated, honestly, could probably benefit from therapy every day.”

Boyd said she would like to implement therapies that she said were proven to work in corrections settings. Even an education in basic coping skills, like meditation, would be useful, she said.

“People forget that being incarcerated is the punishment,” said Boyd. “Everything after that is supposed to be geared towards rehabilitation and treatment.”

[Print](#)
[Email](#)
[Facebook](#)
[Twitter](#)
[LinkedIn](#)

**Related Posts**

1. [Advocates of Prison Reform Aim to Overhaul State’s Solitary Confinement](#)
2. [Isolation, Pepper Spray, Restraints Raise Concerns for Youth at York Correctional](#)
3. [Cathy Osten Talks Mental Health, Workers Comp and Her Priorities this Session](#)
4. [Osten Spearheads Push for Workers’ Compensation to Include Mental Health](#)

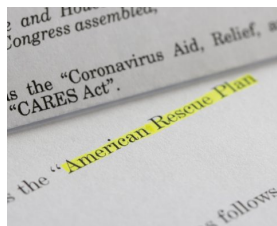
LATEST FROM EMILIA OTTE



**Former Prisoners, Staff, Activists Testify**



**Two Bills Raise Concerns about Funding for**



**5 Ways the \$1.9 Trillion American**



**Federal Aid Announced to Compensate**



**Legislators Debate Two Alternative Funding**



### **on Connecticut's Use of Solitary**

As a number of former prisoners, activists, Department of Correction staff and ministers urged the Connecticut

### **Connecticut's Magnet Schools**

New state legislation could result in a significant loss of funding for regional magnet schools by

### **Rescue Plan May Affect Your Finances**

The American Rescue Plan Act was signed into law on March 11. Here's what Connecticut residents

### **Connecticut Restaurants for 2020 Losses**

A loosening of pandemic restrictions and a large federal aid package could represent a turning point

### **Connecticut's 'Choice' Schools**

So you have a child who loves insects, airplanes and playing with a toy doctor's kit.

---

© Copyright 2021, CT Examiner LLC. All Rights Reserved.

