



**Testimony Calling for Legislation to Reduce the Use of Solitary Confinement in Pennsylvania Prisons**

**Testimony of the Rev. Sandra L. Strauss  
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Good afternoon and thank you to Senator Katie Muth and the Senate Democratic Policy Committee for hosting this important hearing. I am the Rev. Sandy Strauss, Director of Advocacy and Ecumenical Outreach for the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, representing a variety of Protestant denominations in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I am here today to voice our support for legislation to dramatically reduce the use of solitary confinement in Pennsylvania prisons, and to share why we believe this must happen from a moral and faith perspective.

The faith community we represent believes that no human being is beyond redemption. Hebrews 13:3 calls upon us to “remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated...” We believe that we all share a common humanity, and as such we are deeply concerned about mistreatment of any individuals within our prison system.

In 2011, the U.N. special rapporteur on torture warned that solitary confinement “can amount to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment when used as a punishment, during pre-trial detention, indefinitely or for a prolonged period, for persons with mental disabilities, or juveniles” and that it should not be used in excess of 15 days. However, we know that many incarcerated persons in Pennsylvania spend weeks, months, years, and even decades in isolation. Personally, I got to know one formerly incarcerated person who spent four years in solitary, despite a mental health condition that both led to his placement in isolation and then exacerbated it while he was there; isolation caused him to act out, which resulted in more time in solitary. Despite significant support through mentors after release, the injury caused by his time in isolation is apparent and will be with him for the rest of his life.

Use of isolation continues despite data indicating that persons placed in solitary confinement statistically develop psychopathologies at higher rates than those in the general population—nearly double. In other words, if they did not have mental health conditions going in, they do when they come out. And those with existing conditions are more likely to be placed in isolation, as I’ve already shared. The conditions that develop or are exacerbated include anxiety, depression, anger, cognitive disturbances, perceptual distortions, paranoia, psychosis, and self-harm. I’m sure you have experts who can speak to this in greater detail.

And we also acknowledge, as many experts have found, that formerly incarcerated individuals who have experienced isolation for extended periods of time are prone to increased rates of recidivism. Some reasons include lack of access to counseling, family visits, phone calls, and other resources that have been shown to decrease the likelihood of recidivism. Denying contact with families that love them and the very services that provide support to them is cruel and inhumane. Reentry into society becomes more difficult because isolation can create fear, anti-social tendencies, and even tendencies toward violence—which invariably lead to recidivism without significant and sustained support.

Other states have already learned the lessons of research into the effects of solitary confinement, leading them to curtail the use of this cruel brand of punishment. Data show that these states have seen reduction of violence in their prisons, as well as reduced recidivism rates.

We concur with the UN special rapporteur on torture that solitary confinement constitutes cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, and thus certainly fits the definition of torture. As Christians who join most other faith traditions in believing in what is known as the Golden Rule—treat others as you would wish to be treated—we acknowledge that we are called to treat our incarcerated brothers and sisters accordingly. If we claim that all persons are made in God’s image—which we do—we must recognize the face of God in our incarcerated neighbors as well, for they are human beings and should not be defined only by whatever wrong they committed. When we recognize the humanity of our incarcerated siblings, we are required to support them

in their rehabilitation and redemption, so that they may again become whole and full members of our communities.

The House has already introduced legislation to limit this heinous practice. The Senate introduced legislation during the last session, and we urge you to move with deliberate speed to introduce this legislation again. We acknowledge that passage will be a heavy lift—as it has been with much legislation to reform criminal justice practices in Pennsylvania—and it may not pass even in this session. Regardless, we ask you to act now, so that those who remain opposed might know that we are serious in this work, and that it may serve to change hearts and minds of constituents and even some of your colleagues as they learn more about the harms caused.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our thoughts and our support for this important legislation and know that we stand ready to do whatever we can to help.