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Memorandum in Support
HALT Solitary Confinement Act

Interfaith Impact of New York State is an organization of congregations, clergy and lay leaders across the state working for the common good through progressive religious advocacy.

We strongly support the Humane Alternatives to Long Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act (Bill numbers A4401/S2659 in the 2016 Legislative session).

Isolated confinement involves confining people in a cell for 22 to 24 hours a day without meaningful human contact, programming or therapy. Studies show that prisoners detained in these conditions deteriorate psychologically, physically, and socially. The system also appears to be racially biased, with a disproportionate number of non-whites confined to solitary compared to their representation in the prison population. Despite these facts, New York utilizes isolated confinement at rates well above the national average. We can help put a stop to this cruel practice by passing the HALT Act.

This Act does not eliminate Solitary Confinement as a means of maintaining order and safety within correction institutions. What it does is set criteria and put limits on the use of isolation confinement, which human-rights experts regard as torture after 15 consecutive days.

In New York, there are prisoners right now who have spent months and in some cases years, even decades in solitary confinement. This is unnecessary cruelty and unacceptable.

Every morning, more than 4,000 New Yorkers wake up in a prison cell, about the size of a parking space, which they will leave for at most 1 hour during the entire day. They will have no meaningful human contact--even during the 1 hour out of cell--no programs and no activities. Such conditions, over time, do lasting psychological damage. Our state confines far too many people in these brutal conditions.

Prisoners in New York are sent to solitary not by a judge, as part of their sentences, but by prison officials, most often for violating prison rules. Five out of six of these violations are non-violent, rather than conduct posing a threat to others. In effect, solitary is the go-to method of prison discipline in our state.

Compare this with the entire United Kingdom, which has more than three times the population of New York State and a tough, conservative government, but only 50 people in solitary. The routine use of solitary is unnecessarily cruel and inhumane.

Sentences are determined by hearings with a 95% conviction rate and almost no semblance of due process. The system is not only inhumane but also counter-productive: solitary frequently damages a prisoner's ability to form human relationships, making successful reentry after release unlikely and recidivism more likely.

As people of faith, we recognize both a need for justice and prison safety and a balancing need for compassion and a concern for human dignity. We believe that the HALT Solitary Confinement bill achieves that balance. IINYS urges the Legislature to pass the HALT Solitary Confinement bill during the current session.

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