

Unique Coalition Announces Support for Solitary Confinement Restrictions



January 21, 2010

Unique Coalition Announces Support for Solitary Confinement Restrictions

For immediate release

January 21, 2010

Contact: Shenna Bellows (207) 776-5404 (cell)

Today a unique coalition of civil rights, medical, and religious groups announce their support for LD 1611, “An Act to Ensure Humane Treatment of Special Management Unit Prisoners.” The bill, sponsored by Representative Jim Schatz (D-Blue Hill) seeks to limit the amount of time prisoners can be placed in solitary confinement and put in place a review process to ensure that prisoners with mental illness are not kept in the special management unit.

“I am aware that some of the treatment that prisoners receive in our State's version of solitary confinement also known as Special Management Units not only fails to meet the test of being humane or civil, it is often administered with inadequate oversight and absent of due process,” said Representative Jim Schatz of Blue Hill, the sponsor of the bill. “It is my hope that this bill will result in changing institutional behavior and create a better opportunity for persons released from our prison to be successful citizens.”

Schatz is supported by 17 organizations dedicated to limiting solitary confinement.

“Everyone, even those in prison, deserves to be treated like a human being,” said Shenna Bellows, Executive Director of the Maine Civil Liberties Union. “Solitary confinement is torture.”

Medical and psychological research demonstrates that solitary confinement causes physical and psychological harm that can have a lasting and permanent impact on inmates. Joining the coalition in endorsing LD 1611 are the Maine Psychological Association and the Maine Association of Psychiatric Physicians.

“In light of the scientific data indicating a myriad of negative effects of this widespread practice in correctional facilities, the Maine Psychological Association strongly supports LD 1611 and applauds Rep. Schatz's efforts to reverse this inhumane practice in Maine,” said Sheila Comerford, Executive Director of the Maine Psychological Association.

The coalition points out that solitary confinement is a costly practice. The price per prisoner in high security segregation units like the SMU is 2-3 times higher than in ordinary prison units.

“The frequency of use of solitary is the canary in the prison coalmine,” said Craig McEwen, a sociology professor at Bowdoin College. “In a well-functioning correctional system, solitary confinement should be a punishment of last resort, seldom used and applied for short periods of time.”

Religious leaders from many faith traditions have endorsed the campaign to end solitary confinement on moral grounds.

“We believe it is our moral duty to treat everyone with respect for their inherent worth and dignity. The use and abuse of solitary confinement bears a great risk of doing lasting harm to a human mind, body and spirit,” said Reverend Jill Saxby, Executive Director of the Maine Council of Churches. “The mark of a just and moral society is its willingness to limit the use of its power for the sake of our highest, shared values, by extending the protection of human rights to all.”

Individuals and groups who have worked directly with prisoners for years cited specific problems within the Maine State Prison including three deaths in five years, inmate hunger strikes and reports by oversight agencies of low morale, high turnover among guards, and a culture unsupportive of those seeking to enforce prisoners’ rights.

“Problems in Maine’s special management units indicate an urgent need for reform,” said Rachel Talbot Ross, President of the NAACP-Portland branch who works closely with the Maine Prison Branch of the NAACP and was not able to be at the press conference. “Most people in prison will someday be out of prison, and the sort of people they are when they get out of prison is strongly affected by the treatment they receive in prison.

Seventeen groups have endorsed LD 1611 to date. At the press conference, speakers include the bill sponsor, Representative Jim Schatz (D-Blue Hill), Shenna Bellow, Executive Director, Maine Civil Liberties Union, Reverend Bob Emrich, Executive Director, Maine Jeremiah Project, Sheila Comerford, Executive Director, Maine Psychological Association, Craig McEwen, Professor of Sociology, Bowdoin College, Reverend Jill Job Saxby, Executive Director, Maine Council of Churches, and Emily Posner of Mainers Against the Abuse of Solitary Confinement.

###