



Testimony of Giancarlo Cambrelén Santiago
Policy and Research Associate, DC Justice Lab

Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety

Public Hearing on
THE PERFORMANCE OVERSIGHT ON THE
D.C. DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION (DOC)

February 27, 2025

Hello, Chairwoman Pinto and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share my testimony at this hearing.

My name is Giancarlo Cambrelén Santiago, and I am a Policy and Research Associate with DC Justice Lab. I am here today on behalf of the Unlock The Box DC Coalition, working to end the use of solitary confinement in all its forms in the District of Columbia.

To be clear, solitary confinement is being confined or isolated to a cell for 22 or more hours a day and with only a prescribed hour outside of your cell. It inflicts long-lasting damage and is classified by the United Nations as a form of psychological torture, particularly when it goes more than 15 days. Whether someone is locked in a cell with another resident or held alone with only brief, controlled time outside, the extreme restriction on movement and interaction makes solitary confinement a prison within a prison.

That said, I'd like to first take time to thank Chairwoman Pinto for her continued attention to this topic, her willingness to ask tough questions, and her eagerness to engage with us. This has allowed for critical discussion on the use of solitary confinement and the ability to make progress.

However, it has been a tough road moving forward to end this practice at DC Jail. Far too often, people hear that solitary confinement does not exist at DC Jail. Yet, the Department of Corrections (DOC) actively uses restrictive housing, which constitutes solitary confinement. Further, historically, DOC's use of "safe cells" and administrative segregation functioned like solitary confinement. While DOC states it has changed some of its policies for these housing statuses, it remains to be seen if such practices have actually changed.

I understand that safety concerns are a key consideration for the committee and DOC. However, in Virginia, both the House and Senate recently passed bills to limit solitary confinement to 15 consecutive days, ensure access to out-of-cell programming and health evaluations, and require regular reviews of placements in solitary. Similarly, the New York City Jail System has prioritized alternatives by implementing intensive, structured therapeutic programming without isolation. DC can do the same with legislation that mirrors initiatives focused on rehabilitation and recovery rather than punishment.



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Simply put, solitary confinement, regardless of its pseudonym, creates a cycle of punishment that emotionally and mentally breaks individuals down and contradicts the goal of rehabilitation. It often worsens the very conditions it seeks to address

Reform is urgently needed at the DC Jail. Non-action on this issue, along with the lack of clarity regarding its extent, is not acceptable. It sends a clear message to those incarcerated and to the DC community at large that says, we don't care about you. We don't care about those incarcerated, nor the harm we inflict on them. We'd rather let them suffer than offer a rehabilitative chance upon release. This Committee has the opportunity to strengthen its oversight and fully eliminate the use of solitary confinement at the Department of Corrections. We must ensure that those serving their time have clear safeguards to prevent misuse.

This year, with the [ERASE Solitary Confinement Act](#), reintroduced by Councilmember Nadeau and six of your colleagues, we have the opportunity to bring critical reform to DC Jail. The ERASE Act would:

Strictly limit the use of isolation and confinement

Hold the Department of Corrections accountable to victims of abuse

Expand rehabilitative and therapeutic alternatives

I respectfully urge this committee to hold a public hearing on the **ERASE Solitary Confinement Act** this year. This would allow more voices to be heard on this topic.

Please press the Department of Corrections for transparency on its use of solitary confinement and work with the coalition to improve conditions at DC Jail.

Thank you for your time.