

Good morning Chairwoman Pinto, distinguished members of the committee,

My name is Herbert Robinson, and I represent the Unlock The Box DC Coalition. I come before you to shed light on the effects of solitary confinement, informed by my personal experience within the confines of the DC Jail.

My daily reality for an extended period was 22 hours in isolation within a cramped cell, an experience that is not just mine, but one shared by many. The scant two hours permitted outside of this cell were far from a reprieve, as they were marred by the omnipresent threat of violence and a lack of fundamental human necessities. This environment was far from rehabilitative; it systematically dismantled our mental and physical fortitude.

We cannot ignore the evidence that solitary confinement is a severe detriment to mental health, as echoed by the testimony of legal experts and mental health professionals. The United Nations Nelson Mandela Rule recommends that solitary confinement—defined as 22 hours or more without meaningful human contact—be used only in exceptional cases as a last resort, for as short a time as possible.

Research substantiates the dehumanizing impact of such conditions. For instance, the American Psychological Association has highlighted the potential for solitary confinement to lead to depression, anxiety, and psychosis. The harm inflicted extends beyond the period of confinement, with lasting psychological trauma that impedes reintegration into society.

In the DC Jail, the effects of these practices are not experienced in isolation. They reflect broader systemic issues that disproportionately impact marginalized communities, further entrenching cycles of injustice. Reports indicate that policy updates are aimed at improving conditions, but discrepancies between policy and practice persist.

Lawyers from the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia, University Legal Services, and the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs have documented ongoing concerns, such as limited access to water and the absence of out-of-cell time. In some cases, individuals placed in 'safe cells' reportedly face retaliation from correctional officers, compounding the deprivation of their rights.

The ERASE Solitary Confinement Act of 2023 promises vital reforms to a system in dire need of change. It represents a move toward a more humane and just correctional approach that aligns with our shared values of dignity and rehabilitation over punishment and isolation.

I am here to implore this committee to act with urgency. I urge you to schedule a hearing for the ERASE Act and to consider the evidence at hand. Ending solitary confinement is not merely an ideological stance; it is a necessary step to ensure the well-being and fair treatment of all individuals within our correctional facilities.

Your leadership can pave the way for a justice system that is restorative rather than destructive. Let us join together in creating a future focused on healing and reintegration, rather than on practices that leave indelible scars on the human psyche.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to addressing this critical issue.

Respectfully,

Herbert Robinson