

Jillian Burford, *Harriet's Wildest Dreams*

Department of Corrections

Wednesday, April 10th, 2024

Good afternoon, Councilmember Pinto and other council members in attendance. My name is Jillian Burford and I am the Policy Organizer at Harriet's Wildest Dreams (HWD), a Black-led community defense hub based here in Washington, D.C. I am also a D.C. native, lifelong resident of Bloomingdale in Ward 5, and a member of the Unlock the Box D.C. Coalition (UTB), which is a group of solitary confinement survivors and other transformative justice advocates working to end solitary confinement in *all forms* in D.C. Today, I am advocating for the end of solitary confinement in the D.C. Department of Corrections. As a graduate student at Howard University School of Social Work, my work is focused on the mental health of our community members and the harmful policies, protocols, and practices that stunt our community's growth. Solitary confinement is a form of torture and the ramifications of its implementation can be felt beyond the confines the size of a cell no bigger than a parking space. In 2011, the United Nations Special Rapporteur Juan E. Méndez went to the General Assembly and stated the following: "Segregation, isolation, separation, cellular lockdown, Supermax, the hole, Secure Housing Unit...whatever the name, solitary confinement should be banned by States as a punishment or extortion technique."

While it would be nice to believe that solitary confinement is a measure that is sparingly used only on the most "violent" of offenders, I have heard heartbreaking testimony shared by members of our coalition who have experienced solitary. The isolation, the irregular eating schedule, not knowing if it's day or night, and glaring lights beaming down on them all throughout the night for any given amount of time like Albert Woodfox, who spent 42 years in solitary confinement — possibly the longest stint in U.S. history. He was accused of killing a corrections officer and faced three indictments, despite two overturned convictions and no forensic evidence linking him to the crime. But yet and still, he sat in solitary confinement from 1972 until he died alone and broken-spirited in a New Orleans prison at age 75.

While Mr. Woodfox's case is an extreme example of solitary confinement, there is an instance of this method of torture that continues to tug at my heartstring to this day. The story of Kalief Browder, a young Black man who was held in solitary confinement while on pretrial detention at the infamous Rikers Island. In May 2010, Kalief Browder was 16-years-old when he was stopped by NYPD officers on his way home, accused of stealing a man's backpack two weeks earlier. Despite inconsistent stories from his accuser, Kalief was held in pretrial detention at one of the most dangerous adult facilities in the country because at the time, New York State charged 16-year-olds as

adults. Kalief, who turned 17 shortly after his arrest, maintained his innocence and refused to plead guilty. He spent more than 400 days in solitary confinement and was captured on film being beaten by guards. Meanwhile, his accuser never came to court and the charges were eventually dropped. However, the damage was already done. Solitary confinement completely disrupted the trajectory of this young man's life, leading him to end it in 2015 at age 22. Why does Kalief's case hold so much weight for me? Because I was a 22-year-old college student living in NYC. While I roamed freely around the city that raised him and expanded my horizons, Kalief's world was collapsing in on itself because of stop-and-frisk policing, discriminatory policies, pretrial detention, and solitary confinement — all practices that are all too common in D.C.

And while there are distinct differences between prisons and the D.C. Jail, many residents are being held in solitary and subjected to hidden abuses for arbitrary reasons ranging from disagreeing with officers, reading certain books, mental health crises, and even manufactured "staff shortages." Solitary confinement leaves a lasting rift on our communities that only the privileged are fortunate enough to not see. Councilmember Pinto, I ask that you hold a hearing on the ERASE Act, which was introduced by Councilmember Nadeau and seven of your colleagues. The time is now for us to collectively work to improve the conditions in the D.C. Jail by ending solitary confinement except in rare cases.

Please hold Kalief's story in your heart. Although he enrolled in college and excelled in his classes with a 3.55 GPA, he suffered from depression. One more before he was found dead by hanging in his mother's Bronx home, he penned an essay called "A Closer Look at Solitary Confinement in the United States." He wrote, "These ongoing issues are breaking and tarring [sic] up families because their family members are left to pick up the shattered pieces of the ex-inmate with severe mental health issues, and some of the ex-inmate [sic] have neither family member or health insurance to care for them, leaving it a stronger possibility to end up back in prison due to mental misbehaviors that stem from solitary confinement."

Councilmember Pinto, please hold a hearing on the ERASE Act as soon as possible. Thank you.

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