



Testimony of Rabbi Charles Feinberg, Executive Director of Interfaith Action for Human Rights
Before the D.C. Council Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety

Budget oversight hearing for the Department of Corrections and the ERASE Solitary Confinement Act
of 2024

Chairwoman Pinto, and other members in attendance: thank you for this opportunity to share my testimony. My name is Rabbi Charles Feinberg. I am the Executive Director of Interfaith Action for Human Rights which represents people of faith and allies who educate and advocate in Maryland, DC, and Virginia for corrections systems to abolish unnecessarily punitive practices such as solitary confinement and to instead focus on rehabilitation and successful reentry of our citizens. Interfaith Action advocates for the Unlock The Box DC Coalition's struggle to end solitary confinement within the D.C. Department of Corrections.

Over the past ten years, I have testified and attended hearings about conditions of confinement in area prisons in Maryland, DC, and Virginia. Many times, I have listened to corrections officials say that they cannot maintain the safety and security of prisons without employing prolonged isolation/solitary confinement.

For the past ten years, I have heard and read eloquent testimony from returning citizens about the destructive effects of isolation on their mental, spiritual, and physical health. Over the past ten years mental health professionals and researchers have documented how prolonged isolation creates many symptoms of mental illness: despair, depression, paranoia, and any sense of hope. Today this panel has heard many voices describe the terrible effects of prolonged isolation.

How do we maintain the security of prisons without destroying the mental health of the incarcerated? Incarceration is the punishment. Destroying the health of the incarcerated should not be the punishment. That would be torture and we should not be in the business of torturing people.

Yet, the fact remains that many prisons and jails in different states and communities have put an end to prolonged isolation. Correctional Officials in these places have discovered that their institutions are safer and have less violence. Ending prolonged isolation has not endangered staff and incarcerated people. It has reduced the tension in the facility between staff and incarcerated people and among incarcerated people.

I urge the Council to do two things. First, demand that the DC Department of Corrections provide regular accurate data on how solitary is being employed in the DC Jail. Recently, the Council of Court Excellence released [a report](#) that summarizes the limited data that was provided after more than two years of protracted negotiations, and describes the inquiries that remain unanswered by DOC. The Council and the public should have accurate information about the average length of stay in isolation, how often it is deployed, how many people with mental illness are placed in isolation, and other important data about isolation.

Second, I urge the Council to hold a hearing on the ERASE Act, introduced by Councilmember Nadeau and seven of your colleagues. Please hold this hearing as soon as possible, ideally before the Council recess. At this hearing, we will invite correctional officials from other jurisdictions to testify about how they maintain security in their prisons or jails without resorting to isolating people for more than 15 consecutive days. They will testify that with proper training correctional officers can safely manage without resorting to solitary.

The time is now for us to collectively improve conditions at the D.C. Jail including by ending the use of solitary confinement/prolonged isolation except in rare cases.