

Rights groups demand Biden end torture of solitary confinement

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Demonstrators hold signs outside Manhattan criminal court during a march and rally to demand the end of solitary confinement on June 7, 2021 (Photo> AP Mary Altaffer)

Washington, June 9 (RHC)-- A new proposal by the Federal Anti-Solitary Taskforce (FAST) calls on the U.S. government to use legislative, executive and administrative methods to end the “torture” of solitary confinement on inmates in federal detention.

“The debilitating, dehumanizing, and even deadly effects on incarcerated people are an ongoing stain on the American legal system,” Tammie Gregg, director of the American Civil Liberties Union’s (ACLU) Stop

Solitary Campaign, said in a statement. “Medical and mental health experts, impacted people, and advocates agree that solitary confinement constitutes torture,” Gregg continued.

Solitary confinement in federal custody varies across different forms of “restricted housing” in “special housing units” according to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Inmates can be put in solitary for attacking others, for their own safety or even for arguing with guards. It can mean spending 22 to 24 hours in a small cell a day for extended periods.

“Inmates who have been in [special housing units] longer than 90 days are reviewed at the applicable regional office level to determine why he or she is not appropriate for return to general population,” the BOP website says. Extended stays in solitary can “severely” compromise mental health, according to the American Friends Service Committee.

The United Nations Convention Against Torture defines torture as any measure “by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person”. The UN also said in 2011 that solitary confinement of more than 15 days should be banned in most cases.

But roughly 8 percent of 152,832 inmates in federal custody are in some form of solitary confinement in federal custody, according to Bureau of Prisons data. That is close to 12,226 inmates in similar conditions.

The ACLU is one of the 130 advocacy organisations in FAST working to end solitary confinement. The movement to end this form of detention has seen more progress on the state and county levels.

Johnny Perez, a survivor of solitary confinement and director of the US Prisons Program at the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, a member of FAST, said in a statement there “are a growing number of states that have taken a stand against the torture of solitary confinement.”

FAST noted in its recommendations that in “2021, 70 pieces of legislation were filed across 32 states to end some aspect of solitary confinement in state prisons and jails.”

In April, New York banned solitary confinement for longer than 15 days. The move was applauded by advocacy groups pushing for policy change. They noted that Black and Latino comprise roughly 70 percent of New York’s imprisoned population and make up about 80 percent of inmates in solitary, The New York Times reported.

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