



**Testimony of  
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**Before the  
Senate Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights  
Hearing on Reassessing Solitary Confinement  
June 19, 2012**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of Uri L'Tzedek concerning the harmful use of solitary confinement in our nation's federal prisons, jails, and detention centers. We are encouraged that a growing number of states across the nation are reassessing this practice and implementing policies to limit its use. In light of the high cost of solitary confinement and its diminishing returns, we are grateful for the Subcommittee's timely review of the federal system's use of isolation today.

Uri L'Tzedek is the Jewish Orthodox social justice movement guided by Torah values and dedicated to combating suffering and oppression.

Across our nation prisoners, inmates, and detainees are being confined in small cells for 22-24 hours per day for weeks, months, even years. Many studies have documented the detrimental psychological and physiological effects of long-term solitary confinement, including hallucinations, perceptual distortions, panic attacks, and suicidal ideation. Considering this severe harm, we strongly believe prolonged solitary confinement is a violation of the inherent God-given dignity in every human being.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer taught that "Other people's dignity should be as precious to you as your own." (Ethics of the Fathers 2:10). We are inspired by our holy mandate to ensure that all human beings are honored and that each individual created in the image of G-d is treated with basic human dignity.

The use of solitary confinement has increased dramatically in the last few decades. The Commission on Safety and Abuse in American's Prisons noted in their report, *Confronting Confinement*, that from 1995 to 2000, the growth rate of segregation units significantly surpassed the prison growth rate overall: 40% compared to 28%. Rather than a last resort, solitary confinement has become a default management and discipline tool.

The drastic rise in solitary confinement has cost us financially. Super-max prisons are much more expensive than standard facilities to build. Additionally, the daily cost per inmate in a solitary confinement unit far exceeds the costs of housing an inmate in a lower security facility since solitary confinement units require individual cells and significantly more staff.



The success of several states demonstrates that solitary is not the only, or best, option. Several states including Mississippi, Maine, and Colorado have reduced their use of isolation and have proven there are safe alternatives. In an interview with the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, Maine Department of Corrections Commissioner, Joseph Ponte, explained, “Over time, the more data we’re pulling is showing that what we’re doing now [through greatly reducing the use of solitary confinement] is safer than what we were doing before.” Further, we must not neglect the larger public safety impact. The negative effects of prolonged solitary confinement harm our communities. Prisoners who are freed directly from solitary confinement cells are significantly more likely to commit crimes again. Successful reentry of these citizens to our local communities requires preparation for release while they are still incarcerated.

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, Uri L’Tzedek believes strongly that the United States should do everything it can to reverse our nation’s harmful and expensive reliance on solitary confinement. We have a moral obligation to uphold the dignity and the mental health of those currently incarcerated. To that end, we would strongly support your leadership in sponsoring legislation that would limit the use and length of solitary confinement. We implore you to immediately take steps to end the use of prolonged solitary confinement. Your hearing today is a very important effort in doing that, and we thank you for the opportunity to contribute to it.