

## **Safe Alternatives to Solitary Confinement: U.S. Leaders Share Progress and Insights**

On September 29, 2015, the Vera Institute of Justice convened a short meeting to explore what a few states are learning about how to end over-reliance on extended solitary confinement in correctional systems. Researcher Craig Haney reminded attendees why this is essential. He noted that a robust literature on mental and physical harms of the practice shows it can lead to despair and anger, destabilization of the sense of self, and a loss of ability to relate to others. It can also amplify symptoms of mental illness. Shaka Senhor, who spent a total of 7 years in solitary confinement, vividly evoked the experience and pointed out that the damaged people subjected to it may one day be “somebody’s neighbor.” He stressed that “we have every tool available to make the right decision” and challenged policy makers to move toward change.

### ***What does Germany Do?***

To help people think “outside the box,” Jorg Jesse, the Director General of Prison and Probation Administration in Mecklenburg, Germany, described how his country sees the experience of incarceration. In Germany, the maximum period for solitary confinement is 3 months, and the warden must have the consent of a higher authority to impose this extreme punishment. Instead, the country sees the aim of incarceration as resocialization. Only 5 percent of course cases result in prison sentences (in the U.S., it is 65 percent), and correctional officers must have years of training to become effective problem solvers who can further the country’s aim of reducing recidivism. Their aim is to help people who are incarcerated prepare to live a life without crime, a life with “no more victims.” To encourage positive behavior, the system emphasizes the use of incentives as well as deterrents. Sanctions in response to inappropriate behavior might include reducing leisure or work time, reducing the money a person can make, or removing something the person values, such as a radio or TV.

### ***U.S. Leaders are on the Move!***

Some states and communities are leading positive change in the U.S. We heard from executives in Colorado, Washington, and New Mexico, as well as the Hampden County Correctional Center, that it is possible to reduce over-reliance on solitary confinement, advance the interests of public safety, and make prison settings safer.

### ***Policy Changes in Colorado Reduce Assaults and Advance Public Safety***

Rick Raemisch, Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Corrections, was appointed to his position to fulfill the vision of the previous director, who was assassinated by a person who had spent years in solitary confinement. He has gained the cooperation of staff by emphasizing the public safety mission of correctional facilities: “When you send someone back to the community in worse shape than they came in, you have failed.” People in solitary confinement in Colorado represented 7 percent of the prison population in 2011, but less than 1 percent today. Assaults on inmates and staff are the lowest since 2006, a change the Director attributes to new policies that decrease the time people spend in solitary confinement. One year is now an absolute maximum and is imposed only in extreme cases such as assault and rape. Policies also emphasize the need to identify and treat mental illness when it is the underlying cause of a behavioral problem.

### ***Staff Involvement Helps Guide Change in Maine***

The Hampden County Correctional Center describes itself on its web site as a “a model of safe, secure, orderly, lawful, humane, and productive corrections, where inmates are challenged to pick up the tools and directions to build a law-abiding life in an atmosphere free from violence.” Assistant Superintendent Richard McCarthy explained that the Massachusetts facility took the path of reform in 2008, asking staff to identify alternatives to solitary confinement. Changes emphasized positive reinforcement for people on the right track who had previously been in solitary confinement. They could earn the right to time in an exercise cell and were eligible for good time. Many “stepped down” to the general population, and the facility now has 68 percent fewer people in segregation. There has been no increase in violence, and the changed climate of the facility has benefitted both staff and the people held there.

### ***Cognitive-Behavioral Programs Work in Washington***

Bernie Warner, Secretary of the Washington Department of Corrections, said the state is working to move to an evidence-based approach to corrections and has launched promising initiatives to end long-term segregation. The state began with a study of who was in segregation and why, learning that people with mental health issues and gang members were overrepresented. Washington is seeking to create programs that seek to help people in these populations change their behavior. Cognitive-behavioral programs seek to change the thinking and behavior of gang members, and an Intensive Transition Program to help people prepare to return to their communities has had an 80 percent success rate. Like Hampden County, Washington engaged corrections staff in creating its promising programs. The state also trained them to communicate more effectively with people experiencing serious mental illness. The Secretary noted that as the more costly units that rely on solitary confinement are closed (three times as many staff are needed to run these restrictive facilities), resources are freed to support more effective alternatives.

### ***New Mexico Offers Gang Members a Way Out***

Gregg Marcantel, the Secretary of the New Mexico Corrections Department, reported that the state “stole” Washington’s innovative approach to “managing offender change” and ran with it. They distinguished between predators in gangs and people who were simply gang members and might want out. The state created a special management unit for people who wanted to leave gangs and created a step-down program leading to transition and release. He noted that people tend to “fall or rise to expectations,” and creating an expectation of change has helped people change their behavior – and with those changes, altered the state’s reliance on solitary confinement.