



National Religious Campaign
Against Torture

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March 20, 2012

The Honorable Robert F. McDonnell
Office of the Governor
Patrick Henry Building, 3rd Floor
1111 East Broad Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219

Dear Governor McDonnell:

Yesterday, Virginia state Senator Adam Ebbin and Delegates Patrick Hope and Charniele Herring sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Justice calling for an investigation into Virginia's use of solitary confinement at Red Onion State Prison. The more than 300 religious and faith-based groups that support the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), a membership organization committed to ending torture, contend that prolonged isolation is inhumane in the way it destroys prisoners' minds and violates humans' inherent God-given dignity. Many studies have documented the detrimental psychological effects of long-term segregation, such as hallucinations, paranoia, and panic attacks. More often than not, prisoners held in segregation return to society as less functional human beings, and studies indicate that isolation increases prisoners' risk of recidivism.

On March 15, 2012, the *New York Times* reported in an editorial, "Abuse of Solitary Confinement," that in 2010, Virginia paid 50 percent more per day to house prisoners in solitary confinement than in regular cells. In light of the high cost of solitary confinement and its diminishing returns, states around the country are reducing their use of segregation and finding that there are safe alternatives. For example, Mississippi drastically reduced its use of solitary confinement and as a result, has not only saved millions of taxpayer dollars, but actually experienced a decline in violent incidents within prison.

We were pleased to learn that although legislation to require a study of the use of segregation by the Virginia Department of Corrections (DOC) was defeated last month, the DOC expressed no opposition to the study and in fact reported last week on its plans to improve administrative segregation at Red Onion State Prison.

NRCAT applauds the DOC for its internal plans for reforms, including an additional layer of review of prisoners recommended for placement in segregation at Red Onion State Prison. However, we would also urge you to provide for an independent review using expert data analysis methodology. Such independent review has been essential for other states in successfully implementing alternatives to solitary confinement.

The Vera Institute of Justice's Segregation Reduction Project (SRP) facilitates policy changes by reassessing violations qualifying a prisoner for segregation and providing data-based presentations to corrections officials about patterns in and outcomes of their use of segregation. In consultation with corrections staff, SRP recommends strategies to safely reduce segregation and tracks the outcomes of those changes on institutional safety and new violations over time. A summary of SRP's current partnerships with correctional staff in Illinois, Washington and Maryland is enclosed.

Additionally, the Colorado Department of Corrections made a formal request to the National Institute of Corrections (NIC), U.S. Department of Justice, to initiate an external review of its administrative segregation operations. Dr. James Austin, a national expert in offender classification systems and administrative segregation data analysis methodology, and Emmitt Sparkman, Deputy Commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections and expert in prisons operations, worked on-site with Colorado correctional staff and were essential to the overall analysis of the Colorado Department of Corrections' policies and practices. As a result of their review, Colorado has already safely moved more than 300 prisoners out of segregation.

We urge you to request that the Virginia DOC invite independent and objective experts to assist in implementing comprehensive reforms.

Thank you for your consideration.

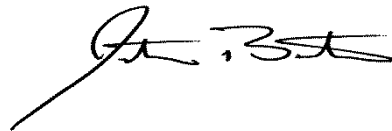
Respectfully,



Linda Gustitus, NRCAT President



Rev. Richard L. Killmer, NRCAT Executive Director



Rev. Jon Barton, General Minister
Virginia Council of Churches

cc: Marla Graff Decker, Secretary of Public Safety
Jane Brown, Director of Community Partnerships