

Comments for NYCBOC on Solitary Confinement

I am Alice Sturm Sutter, a retired family nurse practitioner and nurse volunteer in the Medical Reserve Corp. I am a member of Uptown Progressive Action and the Granny Peace Brigade.

I've had the privilege of working with members of NYCAIC (NY Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement). Together, we worked to end solitary confinement in NYS. I am thrilled to say that after eight years of struggle, our bill, the HALT Solitary Confinement Act, finally passed. The NYS bill will bring truly humane alternatives to people who have endured years and decades of torture under solitary confinement. I think NYC needs, and is capable of passing a similar bill.

Sadly, I can't see how the alternative rules proposed by the Board of Correction can bring about a humane solution. This proposal claims to end solitary confinement and replace it with alternative units where incarcerated individuals are out of their cell 10 hours a day. However, the Risk Management and Accountability System ("RMAS") allows people to be held under conditions that are extremely restrictive and isolating. A healthier and more humane plan would require "out of cell time" that would bring people together in spaces that allow for meaningful human interaction.

The RMAS would allow people to be held indefinitely. I urge that absolute time limits be enforced, with skillfully planned programs to help people move from one level to the next. No new units need to be built. They would be costly, and would still keep people under severe restriction. Meaningful programs that have been successful in the past and in other states and nations, should be explored and implemented. People must have access to their own counsel or legal advocate for hearings, and must have the right to present evidence and cross-examine witnesses. Certain groups of people including elders, young people, pregnant women, mentally ill people and physically disabled people should be protected from being placed in "restrictive housing. Strong limits need to be placed on emergency lock-ins and "deescalation confinement." All people in city jails need to have at least 14 hours out of their cells daily, and be offered participation in helpful programs and activities. Restraints must be banned, except in response to an immediate threat of harm. The use of housing in a restricted environment should only be used in response to dangerous behavior, not for drug sales or rule breaking.

I ask that the Board amend these rules to bring about a real end to solitary confinement, and to other dehumanizing abuses occurring regularly in NYC. Families are suffering immeasurably as solitary confinement and other cruel treatments continue. These practices have led to too many mental health crises and suicides. Those who inflict this tortures suffer as well as they carry out brutal actions daily. As NYC residents, we are all responsible and must speak out to turn this around. Humane treatment and well planned programs have been proven to keep everyone safer and healthier. They need to be implemented in NYC.