



MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATES CALL ON GOVERNOR CUOMO TO TURN TORTURE INTO TREATMENT AND SIGN THE HALT BILL INTO LAW

March 29, 2021

Contact: Harvey Rosenthal, 518-527-0564; Wendy Burch 518-462-2000; Glenn Liebman, 518-360-7916

Mental health advocates from across New York joined today to send a letter demanding that Governor Cuomo sign the Humane Alternatives to Long-Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act into law. The Governor has until midnight on March 31 (ten days excluding Sundays) after the bill was passed) to sign or veto the bill, or it automatically becomes law. The full text of the letter is below.

“Governor Cuomo must take action this week to turn torture into treatment and end the inhumane use of solitary confinement and the irreversible mental and emotional damage it has inflicted on tens of thousands of New Yorkers,” said **Harvey Rosenthal, CEO of the New York Association of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services.**

A 2019 Columbia University concluded that solitary confinement is “a disfiguring and dehumanizing punishment, as it deprives people of their biological needs, it drastically changes their physiology, and causes severe psychological and physical harm.”

The HALT bill has huge support from a broad array of social justice, human rights, mental health and religious groups as well as supermajorities in both houses. Over the past few days, Archbishop Timothy Dolan and editorial boards from the New York Times and Rochester Democrat-Chronicle have called on the Governor to sign the HALT bill.

“We join survivors of solitary confinement and families who have lost loved ones in ‘the Box’, leading civil and human rights groups, faith leaders, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and over 300 other organizations across New York State in urging the Governor to take this historic action this week,” said **Wendy Burch, executive director of the National Alliance on Mental Illness-NYS.**

Mental health advocates have long supported the measure, pointing to its abolishment of the use of ‘the Box’ for individuals with mental, physical or medical disabilities, children and the elderly and pregnant or new mothers.

“The Governor has the opportunity this week to move our state from policies that permanently traumatize and damage New Yorkers to humane approaches that help to advance their rehabilitation and reduce their recidivism,” said **Glenn Liebman, CEO of the Mental Health Association in New York State.**

A recent federal study found that “29% of people in prison and 22% of people in jail with current symptoms of serious psychological distress had spent time in restrictive housing in the past 12 months.”

In New York, at least 1/3 of suicides in state prisons took place in solitary confinement, the rate of suicide attempts in solitary confinement was 12x higher than in the rest of the prisons in 2019 and 40% of inmates with mental illness in solitary confinement reported committing acts of self-mutilation while in prison, according to a 2019 report by the Correctional Association of New York.

Further, African Americans and other people of color, are specifically targeted and sent to solitary confinement at racially discriminatory rates to the extent that the New York Times referred to the disparities as a “scourge of racial bias.”

Research shows that solitary confinement causes immense suffering and devastating physical and mental harm, and often leads to psychosis, heart disease, self-mutilation, and death. Last year, the #HALTsolitary campaign released a devastating report documenting a surge in suicide and self-harm in New York State prisons, driven by solitary confinement.

To counteract the mental health effects of solitary confinement, the bill would make mental health evaluations mandatory for all prisoners before and during their stays in solitary confinement mandatory. It would require the creation of Residential Rehabilitation Units, which would be wards in a prison dedicated to providing therapy and mental health counseling to prisoners.

“It has taken almost 10 years to bring the HALT bill to where it is today, one signature away from an historic moment in advancing humane treatment and lasting rehabilitation in New York State,” said **Rosenthal**. “The Governor must take this last step to ensuring that New York State is a national leader in advancing justice and criminal justice reform.”



March 29, 2021

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo, Governor State of New York
New York State Capitol Albany, NY 12248

Dear Governor Cuomo,

The Mental Health Association in New York State (MHANYS), the National Alliance on Mental Illness-New York State (NAMI-NYS) and the New York Association for Psychiatric Rehabilitative Services (NYAPRS) are the organizations that represent providers of mental health services, those living with mental health challenges and their families. We are writing you collectively to urge you to sign A.2277/S.2836, *the HALT bill*.

Improving the criminal justice-mental illness interface is a leading priority for our organizations. Addressing long-term solitary confinement and the numerous mental health repercussions (including post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression and suicide) which has led the practice to be deemed a form of torture by the United Nations is paramount to this goal.

We join survivors of solitary confinement and families who have lost loved ones in solitary, along with leading civil and human rights groups, mental health advocates, faith leaders, the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, and over 300 other organizations across New York State who support HALT. We applaud the supermajorities of legislators in both the Senate and the Assembly who voted to pass this bill and call for you to immediately sign it.

Our corrections system is currently disproportionately populated by people with mental illness or substance use issues and because of that many people living with a mental illness (as well as other 'vulnerable populations' such as pregnant women and those in the LGBTQ community) are being tortured here in New York every day. You now have the power to end this torture and prevent mental health implications for years to come by signing A.2277/S.2836.

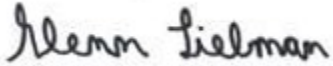
Research shows that solitary confinement causes immense suffering and devastating physical and mental harm, and often leads to psychosis, heart disease, self-mutilation, and death. Last year, the #HALTsolitary campaign released a devastating report documenting a surge in suicide and self-harm in New York State prisons, driven by solitary confinement. Every other day in 2019, on average, a person in New York State prison attempted suicide, and at least one-third of all suicides took place in solitary confinement.

We implore you to take a major step towards a more mentally healthy and just state by signing A.2277/S.2836 and halting solitary confinement.

Sincerely,



Wendy Burch, Executive Director, NAMI-NYS



Glenn Liebman, CEO, MHANYS



Harvey Rosenthal, CEO, NYAPRS