

March 31, 2014

Senator Loni Hancock, Chair
Senate Public Safety Committee
State Capitol, Room 2031
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: SB 970 (Yee)
Position: Support

Dear Senator Hancock:

On behalf of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT) and its network of more than 300 diverse faith-based organizational members across the United States, I write in strong support of SB 970 (Yee), a bill that would limit the harmful practice of placing youth in solitary confinement in the juvenile justice system in California.

As people of faith, we urge you to support this bill. The many faith traditions that comprise the National Religious Campaign Against Torture recognize the inherent dignity of each human being, and the particular importance of protecting the health and growth of children. We believe that the solitary confinement of youth denies the need that human beings have for community and profoundly disrupts the developmental progress of children. We believe that it must be brought to an end in California and throughout the United States.

Research consistently demonstrates that the long-term psychological effects of solitary confinement, particularly among children, are devastating, resulting in hallucinations, paranoia, and increased rates of self-mutilation and suicide. The damage of solitary confinement is a violation of human dignity and is of grave concern to the faith community. We strongly support the passage of SB 970, particularly as it seeks to curb the use of solitary confinement in juvenile facilities and as it empowers existing county juvenile justice commissions to report on the use of solitary confinement. SB 970 is in keeping with efforts in many states to ban or limit the use of solitary confinement—a practice widely defined as torture due to the long-term effects on the mental health of the confined.

Urgently needed reforms made possible by SB 970 include a provision defining solitary confinement as involuntary placement in a room or cell in isolation from persons other than staff and attorneys, a provision that requires that children only be held in solitary confinement for the minimum time required to address the safety risk and a provision that solitary confinement shall

only be used when a young person poses an immediate and substantial risk of harm to others or the security of the facility, and when all other less restrictive options have been exhausted.

Solitary confinement has been widely condemned as torture. In October 2011, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Torture called on all countries to ban solitary confinement of prisoners except in very exceptional circumstances and for as short a time as possible, with an absolute prohibition in the case of juveniles and people with mental disabilities.

Momentum to halt the abusive use of solitary confinement in U.S. prisons, jails and detention centers continues to build nationally, with the second Congressional Hearing on the use of solitary confinement convened by Senator Dick Durbin (IL) in February of this year. At the hearing, Sen. Durbin called for “all federal and state facilities to end the use of solitary confinement for juveniles, pregnant women, and individuals with serious and persistent mental illness, except in those exceptional circumstances where public safety requires it.”

In a moment when the use of solitary confinement of youth is under increasing scrutiny around the country, SB 970 presents California with a critical opportunity to lead the way nationally in increasing access to rehabilitation and reducing harm for our young people.

We urge you to support S.B. 970. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Laura Markle Downton, M.Div.
Director of U.S. Prisons Policy and Program
National Religious Campaign Against Torture