



June 8, 2022

President Joseph R. Biden  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20050

Dear Mr. President,

As a national taskforce of civil rights, human rights, religious, and health organizations and leaders, including people who have survived solitary confinement, people who have had family members in solitary confinement, and their allies, we write to you with grave concern in the wake of both the May 31 [Marshall Project/National Public Radio exposé](#) of routine brutality and torture at the deadly Thomson Federal Prison and your May 25 [Executive Order](#) on Policing and Criminal Justice Practices. We are writing to urge you to take immediate action, including instructing the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to end all solitary confinement now. To stop the abuse inside federal prisons and demonstrate your Administration's continued commitment to the health and well-being of the people inside these prisons, we urge you to:

1. End solitary confinement in all federal prisons and detention facilities;
2. Close Thomson Prison and all federal supermax prisons;
3. Appoint a federal Bureau of Prisons Director committed to human rights, racial justice, and transformational change; and
4. Grant clemencies to people in federal custody.

The staff abuse, systematic infliction of solitary confinement, and deadly consequences at the Thomson prison reported by the Marshall Project/NPR are beyond egregious. These abuses are not unique to Thomson but rather are pervasive throughout the prison system.

Your May 25 Executive Order stated that it is your Administration's policy that people in prison must be "free from prolonged segregation," and isolation must be "used rarely, applied fairly, and subject to reasonable constraints." Yet over [10,700 people](#) on any given day are being held in some form of solitary confinement in federal Bureau of Prisons facilities alone. That rate – nearly 8% of the total federal prison population – is substantially higher than the [national average](#) in state prison systems and even higher than in the federal BOP a [decade ago](#), before some reductions were made under the Obama administration.

Moreover, people currently spend months and years in solitary in federal prisons, despite the internationally recognized standard of the United Nations Mandela Rules that defines prolonged

solitary confinement as exceeding 15 days, and prohibits such confinement as torture. Recognizing the commitment your Administration has made to racial and other forms of equity, we note that in federal custody, as in state and local jurisdictions across the country, solitary and other forms of restrictive housing and practices are [disproportionately](#) inflicted on Black people, Latinx people, Native people, and other people of color, as well as transgender and gender non-conforming people, people with mental health needs, and young people.

Experts agree that the sensory deprivation, lack of normal interaction, and extreme idleness of solitary can lead to severe [psychological](#), [physical](#), and [neurological](#) damage, [heart disease](#), dramatically increased rates of [self-mutilation and suicide](#), and dramatically increased rates of [death even after release](#). Even [one or two days in solitary](#) can cause severe health impacts. Solitary confinement has directly caused the deaths of far too many people this year, and every year. It has increased violence and harm in prisons, placing both corrections officers and other incarcerated people in grave danger, while also jeopardizing community safety. Evidence shows that the opposite of solitary confinement – providing people [full days out-of-cell with pro-social engagement and programming](#) – actually increases safety inside prisons and jails and in outside communities after people return home.

Mr. President, [you](#) and [Vice President Harris](#) ran for the highest offices in the land on a promise that you would carry out an “overhaul of inhumane prison practices,” and would start by ending solitary confinement. The torture, brutality, and deaths occurring at Thomson prison, and across the federal prison system, could not be further from this pledge.

To fulfill your commitments, you must start by fully ending solitary confinement immediately. Your May 25 Executive Order, provides the Attorney General 180 days to report on progress made toward limiting the use of solitary confinement and other forms of restrictive housing. The Attorney General and Department of Justice must use this time frame to live up to your campaign promise, beginning with ordering the immediate release of people from solitary confinement and other forms of restrictive housing.

As a coalition of faith leaders, civil and human rights leaders, and legal experts we stand ready to assist your Administration in fully ending the torture of solitary confinement and utilizing proven alternative interventions. In June 2021, in conjunction with 150 faith and secular organizations sending you a letter urging your administration to end solitary confinement, our coalition released a [Blueprint for Ending Solitary Confinement by the Federal Government](#), which outlined in detail steps that would end all forms of solitary confinement other than lock-ins measured at most in hours for emergency de-escalation and would implement proven alternative forms of separation involving full days of out-of-cell group programming and engagement.

In addition, as a signal of your continued commitment to an overhaul of inhumane prison practices and an end to solitary confinement, we urge you to shut down Thomson prison. Closing

this solitary confinement-centered supermax facility designed only for torture will demonstrate that this Administration will not tolerate the types of reported abuse in one of your prisons. Several states have closed supermax prisons out of humanitarian and safety concerns.

Moreover, to address the far-reaching issues of solitary confinement and brutality will require appointment of a Bureau of Prisons director who is committed to, and has a plan of action for, ending solitary confinement, as well as a broad commitment to human rights, racial justice, and decarceration. We were extremely disappointed to note the BOP's erroneous response to the Thomson reporting, falsely claiming that when two people are locked in a solitary confinement cell all day and night together, this is not "solitary confinement." As the Obama Administration acknowledged, reforms to the use of restricted housing must include changing the practice of locking two people in a solitary cell together. Experts have long known – what is also common sense – that being involuntarily trapped in a small cell with another person up to 24 hours a day for days, weeks, months, and years causes severe psychological harm and potentially deadly danger. The type of transformational change needed at the federal Bureau of Prisons to end the kind of rampant abuse described in the Marshall Project/NPR reporting requires transformational leadership committed to fundamental change.

Ultimately, one of the most effective ways to stop the abuse of people who are incarcerated is to release more people to the outside community. We also urge you to implement mass clemency options in line with your pledge to use your clemency power to release people from prison.

Bold action is needed now in order to stop torture and brutality, save lives, and improve safety and well-being for all. We urge you to act.

Sincerely,

Members of the Federal Anti-Solitary Taskforce (FAST):

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR)

National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT)

Unlock the Box Campaign

*The Federal Anti-Solitary Taskforce (FAST) is working to fully end solitary confinement in federal prisons and detention facilities (and end solitary in states, as well). The Taskforce is comprised of civil rights, human rights, faith, and health organizations and leaders, including people who have survived solitary confinement, people who have had family members in solitary confinement, and their allies. Members of the Taskforce have been working to end solitary confinement across the country and have come together to push for an end to solitary confinement federally. For more information, contact: [jsandoval@unlocktheboxcampaign.org](mailto:jsandoval@unlocktheboxcampaign.org)*