

August 22, 2016

Governor Jerry Brown  
State Capitol, Suite 1173  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Governor Brown:

We write as clergy and religious leaders in California from a diverse array of faith traditions who stand together in strong support for SB 1143, a bill that would limit the immoral practice of placing youth in long-term isolation in California's juvenile facilities. Building on your commitment to promote policies rooted in restorative justice and opportunity, SB 1143 will set nationally recognized best standards into law regarding the use of "room confinement" in juvenile facilities. As moral leaders in our state, we urge you to support this bill.

Our various faith traditions hold in common a belief in the inherent dignity of every person, and the importance of fostering the health, potential and growth of every child. We have heard the brave testimony of the young people in our state who have survived isolation, and we stand in solidarity with them in declaring that not only does placing youth in conditions of isolation disrupt brain development, it demonstrates a fundamental failure to provide youth with the tools for a future of possibility and hope.

SB 1143, authored by Senator Mark Leno and sponsored by juvenile justice experts and advocates, as well as the Chief Probation Officers of California, recognizes the importance of education, programming and other pro-social activities that help improve outcomes for youth and meet the rehabilitative goals of the juvenile justice system. SB 1143 offers California an historic opportunity to lead the country in setting nationally recognized best standards to improve youth outcomes. This bill is in keeping with federal efforts and reforms in states throughout the country to limit the use of long-term isolation for youth and adults, in favor of humane alternatives that prioritize rehabilitation and public safety. Earlier this year, President Obama fundamentally questioned the practice of solitary confinement, describing it as "an affront to our common humanity." He issued a Presidential Memorandum to limit the use of isolation, which includes limits in federal juvenile facilities to a maximum of three hours, and a ban on its use for the purposes of punishment or discipline.

At our juvenile facilities, isolation makes everyone unsafe, which includes not only the youth, but also the staff. We believe that there are different interventions that could lead to better and safer outcomes. Our support for SB 1143 is rooted in our concern for the toxic environment isolation creates within facilities, including the high incidence of suicide amongst youth held in isolation. We affirm that facility safety, and public safety, can be maintained consistent with principles of human dignity and human rights.

Extended solitary confinement is globally recognized as torture, and a practice that should be abolished for young people. Juan Mendez, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, has testified that prolonged solitary confinement in excess of 15 days should be subject to an absolute prohibition based on scientific evidence of its psychological damage. He has called for a ban on its use for those most vulnerable to its impacts, including youth. In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a revised version of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners to reflect these standards, known as the ‘Nelson Mandela Rules.’

For all of the above reasons, and for the sake of bringing dignity and restored hope to our state’s most vulnerable youth, we urge you to support SB 1143, and we stand with you in this important and needed legislation.

Sincerely,

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