

Tuesday October 09, 2012
[The Buffalo News.com \(/\)](#)

Opinion

Another Voice / Prison discipline

Another Voice: Solitary confinement is an invaluable tool

Updated: October 9, 2012, 01:24 AM Published: October 9, 2012, 12:21 AM

By William J. Morgan Jr.

The words of Brian Fischer, commissioner of the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, in an October public statement about Special Housing Units reveals it all:

“The debate over what is an appropriate sentence for a crime committed in society or within the confines of a prison elicits competing points of view. The New York Civil Liberties Union has issued a report that supports their belief that disciplinary segregation in New York State prisons is ‘arbitrary, inhumane and unsafe.’ That is their opinion. I disagree.”

A description of early segregation finds deplorable conditions, “Dug under Block #14, the hole was nothing but a pit in the ground where incorrigible inmates would stay locked, sometimes for weeks. There was no light, little air, and those thrown into its tortuous grip would receive water and a slice of bread, if they got to it before the rats and roaches.” This is not the situation today.

In these modern times, inmates who commit infractions and crimes are subject to disciplinary housing. They are not held in extreme isolation or deprived of the necessities of life. SHUs, in the great majority of cases, are used only to the extent that the inmate has shown that he cannot return to the general population. Furthermore, they are not placed there “just because,” as arbitrariness would dictate.

Offenders may be placed in the SHU for their safety or the safety of others, as it is the jail of the prison. It has been intimated that inmates are simply thrown in these places without due process, which they are afforded so much as the courts allow. They receive a hearing and may remain in the SHU, subject to lesser disciplinary sanctions or acquitted of the charges. Crimes or rule infractions in prison are an individual choice that needs to be addressed for a practical rehabilitative structure.

Based upon their behavior, inmates deprive themselves of the freedom of general population, rehabilitative programming or transitional programming. They are not deprived of food, warmth or a secure environment. In SHUs, inmates are provided with reading and writing materials, music, medical/psychological care, court-mandated recreation and communication with security and civilian staff.

Inmates are segregated for a number of reasons: weapons, drugs, unruly behavior, deviant sexual behavior and assault, to name a few. To say that SHUs, the box, or whatever moniker one uses, are anything but well-run is to make an extremely irresponsible statement. Special Housing Units are an invaluable tool to control out-of-control inmates just as jails are to the larger society.

If inmates are not willing to abide by the rules, then they need to be segregated from the general population for the safety of staff and other inmates.

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