

Special Housing Units in prisons for a reason

By Donn Rowe

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The Times Union recently profiled former state prison inmate Jeff Rockefeller, and cast a sympathetic light on the hardship he says he faced serving time in solitary confinement. The article included interviews with Rockefeller's mother, girlfriend, and numerous advocates who believe disciplinary confinement should be eliminated.

What it didn't include were interviews with the people Rockefeller threatened to kill or harm over the past five years, including officials in the Rensselaer County District Attorney's office, correction officers and other inmates. Rockefeller has twice been convicted for threatening violence — and his threats continued once he was incarcerated.

That is the other side of this story. Special Housing Units are for inmates who are a danger to others and themselves. No one serves time there without cause.

Two years ago, an inmate beat a correction officer so badly that he still can't return to work. By law, that correction officer will soon lose his job and benefits, leaving his family without health insurance or a regular paycheck.

Should we feel sympathy for the inmate who served time in the SHU for that vicious attack? SHUs are the only mechanism for removing dangerous inmates from the general population. It is especially critical in New York's medium-security facilities, where dozens of inmates live together in dorms and a violent disruption would prevent orderly inmates from attending programs aimed at rehabilitation.

Every inmate in solitary confinement has inflicted suffering to some degree on another innocent person. Even if we don't see their suffering in the news, it's very real to the people who live with it everyday.

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