



The Advocacy Corner

Steve Hart

Solitary Confinement in New York State

In the first column of this series, I argued that seeking peace and justice, in part through advocacy, is an essential part of our ministry. In a future column, I'll talk about who is mainly responsible for advocacy. I don't think I'll spoil the suspense if I tip you off to the bottom line answer: you and me. This time, let's look at one issue: isolated confinement in NY prisons. We have an opportunity right now to be advocates on this issue.

The situation is that more than 4,000 New Yorkers each day are "in the box," enduring for months or years conditions that are inhumane, leading not just to temporary suffering but to permanent psychological damage, with outcomes such as suicide and hallucinations. In isolation

cells, prisoners have no meaningful human contact, no programs or activities, and an environment of sensory deprivation.

As Episcopalians we frequently reaffirm our baptismal promise "to respect the dignity of every human being," and we believe that God loves every one of us, with no exceptions. We could not countenance what is being done—in our name, and using our tax dollars—under any circumstances. But what makes the situation especially bad is that 5 out of 6 sentences to isolated confinement in New York are for non-violent, often trivial, violations of prison rules, such as having too many postage stamps. Basically, prolonged solitary is used as the routine prison discipline system. This is totally unnecessary: the UK, with a conservative government and 3 times our population, has only 50 prisoners in isolation.

In January 2014, a bill was introduced in the Assembly and State Senate—the HALT Solitary Confinement bill, A08588 and S06466. If passed, it will drastically curtail the number of people sent to solitary and the length of time they spend there. This bill gives us an opportunity to do something practical and specific in our local community: visit our state legislators, discussing the bill and urging them to support it. It's a one-shot action that can make a significant difference. Any parish probably has members living in several different Assembly and Senate districts. My hope is that members of parishes in our diocese can be an important part of delegations for all the districts in Western New York.

Each of you should make your own decision about whether you support the bill, based on your own reason, faith, and conscience. A variety of resources that can help you make a decision, from single-page fact sheets on the bill and the current use of solitary in New York to the complete text of the bill and a comprehensive report by the NY Civil Liberties Union, are available at epfwny.org/isolation.

If you support the bill, please consider being in a delegation. You don't need any special skills or background. The campaign for the bill will provide an information packet, and there will be a preparation meeting of each delegation before the visit, where we can go over the bill and the issues it raises, and practice presenting our views. If you are interested, or have questions, please call (903.9090) or e-mail me (evestay@live.com).