



House Corrections Committee
Testimony for HB 1084
April 23rd, 2015

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Dear Members of the House Corrections Committee,

My name is Laura Austin. I work as Public Policy Intern for the Texas branch of the National Alliance on Mental Illness, also known as NAMI Texas. My testimony is in support of HB 1084. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

TDCJ confines 4.4% of its prison population in solitary confinement. Texas locks more people in solitary-confinement cells than twelve states house in their entire prison system. A 2006 survey of state prisons nationwide found that 56.2% of inmates had a mental health problem, which was defined by the presence of symptoms and/or a history of mental health problems within the past 12 months. It is clear from these statistics that mental illness within the criminal justice system needs to be addressed, and the regulation of administrative segregation is one sphere of the prison system in which we have the opportunity to improve the treatment of state inmates with mental health problems.

Administrative segregation is a highly psychologically stressful experience. Inmates are locked up 23 to 24 hours a day in small cells that frequently have solid steel doors. On average, prisoners remain in solitary for almost four years; over one hundred Texas prisoners have spent more than twenty years in solitary confinement. They live with extensive surveillance and security controls, are deprived ordinary social interaction, are often provided only three to five hours a week of recreation alone in caged enclosures, and little, if any, educational, vocational, or other purposeful activities. According to a 2006 study in the Journal of Criminal Justice, even inmates without mental illness experience psychological effects of administrative segregation, including anxiety and depressive symptoms, anger, cognitive disturbances, perceptual distortions, obsessive thoughts, and paranoia.

One need only imagine the effects such an experience has on individuals with mental illness. Serious mental illness—which included disorders such as Major Depressive Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, Schizophrenia, and other psychotic disorders—is characterized by significant functional impairments, and in some cases psychotic symptoms. Numerous case studies and research articles have shown that the stress, lack of meaningful social contact, and unstructured days of administrative segregation can exacerbate the symptoms of mental illness or provoke recurrence of an illness in remittance. Two 2007 studies have asserted that psychological stressors such as isolation can be as clinically distressing as physical torture. Suicides occur disproportionately more often in segregation units than elsewhere in prisons. A 1988 national study of 401 jail suicides found that two thirds of

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the suicides occurred in a control unit. A 2007 study identified solitary confinement as a major factor in suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in the prison system. All too frequently, mentally ill prisoners decompensate in isolation, requiring crisis care or psychiatric hospitalization.

HB 1084 is a huge step in improving TDCJ's use of and practices surrounding administrative segregation. The bill requires reports on inmates in administrative segregation as well as in the general population, including rates of suicide and recidivism. It is important to continue to collect such information so that Texas can identify the issues to address.

The real meat of the bill, however, is not in the reporting requirements but in the mandate to review and refine the current practices of Ad. Seg. Under this legislature, TDCJ shall conduct a review of Ad. Seg. Policies and examine methods to reduce the number of inmates in Ad. Seg. Based off of this review TDCJ shall develop a plan to reduce the use of Ad. Seg. Based on the inmates needs, and without endangering the safety of other inmates, the plan must provide an inmate in Ad. Seg. with the opportunity to participate in educational courses, work-related training, and vocational programs similar to those available to the general inmate population. The plan must provide increases in amount of time the inmate is allowed out of their cell and daily contact with prison staff, the opportunity to exercise with inmates in the general prison population, and access to audio and visual media that provides mental stimulation. All of these provisions would significantly increase the quality of life of inmates in Ad. Seg. and would have substantial positive effects on the mental health of these inmates.

The bill also lays out the necessity of adequate and regular access to mental health services for inmates in Ad. Seg. NAMI Texas is in strong support of this clause. Mental Health services need to be available for all inmates in the TDCJ and is especially important for inmates that are experiencing the psychologically stressful conditions of solitary confinement.

One aspect of HB 1084 that NAMI Texas particularly likes is the support it provides to a particular subset of inmates in Ad. Seg.: inmates who are discharged from prison directly from Ad. Seg. These individuals go from complete solitary confinement 23 hours a day to living in the general population of Texas; unsurprisingly, this complete lack of transition and transitional planning can have detrimental effects and outcomes. HB 1084 seeks to rectify this by ensuring that immediately before an inmate's release they have access to programing on social skills, life skills, anger management techniques, and law-abiding behaviors, as well as information on obtaining and maintaining long-term employment and stable housing. Ad. Seg. step-down programs have shown success in other states, including Virginia where a program was successfully implemented over the past several years.

Quite simply, HB 1084 is a good bill. It works to reduce the population in Ad. Seg., a move that has been shown in other states to improve prison safety and save money, and it would improve the conditions and mental health of inmates in Administrative Segregation. Therefore, NAMI Texas and our 27 local affiliates respectfully urge the committee to support this bill. Thank you very much for your time, I would be happy to answer any questions.

For reference (for myself if they ask questions):

"Inmates confined in Ad Seg for reasons other than the inmate's misconduct or disciplinary record"

Section 2. part (e) "The plan may not result in increased danger to inmates imprisoned in, or employees employed at, any facility operated by or under contract with the department"