

SEGREGATION IN MASS. PRISONS

By Joe Labriola

Over the past 40 years I have spent 18½ years on segregation. My longest stretch was 9 years straight. It began in 1973 while in Walpole prison. Back then they called the hole "The Plant" and later dubbed it "The Commissioners Block". Soon, the psychological misfits entered the picture and we became a social experiment. The hole, box, plant was now called the Department Segregation Unit. So, for those who say segregation does not exist in Mass., please check out the middle word of the new title. Today the hole is called; "Department Disciplinary Unit or DDU. The word segregation was removed but the conditions of confinement remained the same and in most cases even more onerous.

I watched many men commit suicide because they could not handle the loneliness and deprivation. Men mutilated themselves with razor blades and in some cases cut off their own sexual organs. Others acted up for attention because as some have admitted; "even negative attention is better than no attention at all." For my part I chose to fight. I went through several ballpoint pens letting as many people as I could reach know what was going on behind the walls. I even got all the cockroaches removed from the infamous 10 block (see my paper on this at www.freejoelab.com). I exhorted and encouraged other men to write to their local representatives to let them know how bad segregation conditions really were. I figured by giving men a task it would take their minds off the misery.

Throughout the years I wrote and studied. I read several hundred books and tried my best to fight off the torments of segregation by improving on my personal quest for meaningful knowledge. I bought books for the men on the tiers with me and had them at the bars as we discussed them openly. I started poetry writing contests that men were happy to get involved with. All of this through the bars.

I hear the mental people saying that the conditions of confinement in segregation is so much better these days and that the men are treated more humanely. Does treatment really matter to anyone locked in a box? You are stuck in situ with no means of viable stimulation or human contact. That kind of pain cannot be assuaged with a tv or walkman radio.

Today, Massachusetts prison own the title of most suicides committed in their system by 4 times the nation average. Why? Why do men and women in Mass. prisons chose to end their lives rather than stick it out in a box? It is because the system is a complete and utter failure No good has EVER come out of segregation? How does such barbarity serve the commonweal? How does it produce better citizens who will eventually return to the communities outside the razor wire? How does it make better and more compassionate free men when this sort of thing is done in YOUR name?

**SOLITARY SUFFERERS
IN
SOLITARY CONFINEMENT**

Anyone with any firsthand experience of a life sentence in prison refers to it as death chambers. Few know of the darker hallows within these chambers known as the "Hospital Services Unit" or HSU. This is not selective to the worst of the worse; it does not prejudice but is open to any who happen to fall in the fate of illness or agedness – people in need of medical care, in need of encouragement, in need of human compassion. And instead, they are isolated and ignored, silently suffering.

The Massachusetts Department of Correction would not say these sickly ones are in solitary confinement because they have "wards" where men who cannot hold their bowels are given diapers to fester in their feces. When convenient, or under the protests of others subject to the fecal stench, the unwilling staff changes these diapers because the men stewing in them simply are incapable of even doing that. For those recently sick, it is a feeling of shame, for those who have lingered in these death units they are dulled to the Hopeless Solitary Undignified (HSU) life they are left with. Last year, this solitary suffering of one "patient" waited until maggots visited the unchanged diaper – FACT! His name is Frank Soffen. Today Frank is unable to even communicate, not in touch with reality, and wastes away in his solitary suffering after a parole board determined him unrehabilitated and not eligible for parole.

These men are not allowed fellow prisoners to visit them. They are not allowed to go out to programs, to church, nor to the prison yard for fresh air. Their solitary status is justified under the ruse of health "concerns". This lack of human contact is only further debilitating.

Some states allow inmates to care for inmates – not here. On paper, a companion program has been launch but the administration's interviews of those THEY choose are more concerned with inmates who will kowtow to whatever they say than prisoners who know the sickly person, empathizes with them and will give them the attention and time they need to feel human.

Solitary confinement comes in different way, but this extreme confinement of those in serious illness is the worst!