



Old Chatham Quaker meeting will be exhibiting a replica of a solitary housing unit (SHU), used in New York State Prisons for disciplinary confinement, at the Columbia County Fair in Chatham, N.Y. from Wednesday, August 29st through Monday, September 3, 2018. We also showed this exhibit last year for the fair, and are repeating it because of its educational value and its being an opportunity for outreach.

The United States is facing a crisis of mass incarceration with over 2.2 million people packed into its jails and prisons, 80,000 of whom in any given year are housed in solitary housing units. The SHU is still used in New York State prisons despite a 2015 agreement NYS is implementing to reduce its use. People in a SHU in NYS spend 22 to 24 hours a day locked in a cell the size of an elevator, alone or with one other person. Over 40% of all suicides in NY prisons in 2014 and 2015 took place in solitary, though only 9% of all people in prison are in solitary.

Our meeting has received a grant of \$420 from the NYYM Outreach Initiatives Support Fund to help fund this exhibit. What we need most are volunteers to help us staff the booth. We will staff the booth in shifts of 2-3 hours each, two persons per shift. The shifts are Wednesday NOON to 9pm and Thursday-Monday 10am-9pm. If you are interested in helping staff the exhibit, contact Ann Rommel rsr@taconic.net or Bob Elmendorf poetapoetus@taconic.net We will provide a training and orientation session which is required for first time staffers.

There will be literature available describing the harmful psychological effects of SHU and handouts and books on mass incarceration in America, a brochure on our Meeting and on Quaker's work in prisons over the years. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann spoke on "Liberating Minds", her book advocating free college education for everyone in prison, at our meetinghouse on June 16, 2018 and her book will be available for sale, as will Donnell Joseph's Under the Walnut Tree, a memoir of how he survived prison, became a Quaker and found love.

Numerous studies have documented the harmful psychological effects of long-term solitary confinement, which can produce debilitating symptoms, such as: visual and auditory hallucinations, hypersensitivity to noise and touch, insomnia and paranoia, uncontrollable feelings of rage and fear, distortions of time and perception, increased risk of suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

These effects are magnified for two particularly vulnerable populations: juveniles, whose brains are still developing, and people with mental health issues, who are estimated to make up one-third of all prisoners in isolation.

If a person isn't mentally ill when entering an isolation unit, by the time they are released, their mental health has been severely compromised. Many prisoners are released directly to the streets after spending years in isolation. Because of this, long-term solitary confinement goes beyond a problem of prison conditions, to pose a formidable public safety and community health problem.

Prison isolation fits the definition of torture as stated in several international human rights treaties, and thus constitutes a violation of human rights law. The U.N. Convention Against Torture defines torture as any state-sanctioned act "by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person" for information, punishment, intimidation, or for a reason based on discrimination.

Since the 1990s, the U.N. Committee Against Torture has repeatedly condemned the use of solitary confinement in the U.S. In 2011, the U.N. special rapporteur on torture warned that solitary confinement "can amount to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment when used as a punishment, during pre-trial detention, indefinitely or for a prolonged period, for persons with mental disabilities, or juveniles." The entire United Nations General Assembly has denounced solitary exceeding 15 days.

In 2014, AFSC submitted a "shadow report" to the U.N. Committee Against Torture, featuring testimonies from people subjected to long-term isolation.

This exhibit will provide the opportunity for our meeting to educate visitors not only about the use of the SHU, but the even greater problem of mass criminalization and incarceration in America.