

Colson Task Force Personal Testimony

I urge the Colson Task Force to reevaluate the use of solitary confinement in federal prisons. I can personally attest that solitary confinement is torture. All solitary units are fundamentally the same: 22-24 hours per day locked up, alone. I have been in several solitary units in federal prisons, but I was held at Tamms Correctional Center, Illinois' now-closed supermax prison, for 12 years, from 1998 until 2010. Before I explain what I went through, I want you to know that while I am no longer physically at Tamms, Tamms is still in my head.

In 1998, I was housed in the minimum security unit at a prison in Las Cruces, New Mexico. My cell door was virtually never locked. I was able to come and go at will, and even carry scissors with me. My job was institutional tailor, cleaning and/or repairing employee uniforms. When the clothing was finished, I would walk outside the prison to the employees' cars, put their clothing in the car, lock the car, and return their car keys. Many times there were guns in these cars, and I was trusted to complete this job unsupervised. This was all within 15 minutes of the U.S./Mexico border!

On March 28, 1998, without warning, instead of going to my tailor job, I was ordered to get dressed, and was placed in both leg irons and handcuffs with a waist chain. I was put on an airplane to Greenville, Illinois. I was escorted off the plane, a riot officer on each side holding one of my arms. I have epilepsy, and I had a seizure. The response of the riot officers holding me was to slam me face down on the ground in a puddle. One even put his combat boot on the back of my neck/head. The riot officers began screaming "WELCOME TO TAMMS!" I was not afforded any medical treatment. I was thrown on a bus and taken to Tamms "supermax" prison in Southern Illinois.

I never received any disciplinary report nor was it alleged that I violated any prison rules to be placed in Tamms. Though I've asked, to this day I still don't know why I was put there.

Entering Tamms was a shock. I actually felt like I was entering a tomb. The cell and wings of Tamms are all gray. I can only describe my cell as a gray box: the walls were all gray, and the only view outside my slit of a window was of a gray wall. The cell was all raw gray concrete that was so new, I could taste the dust in my mouth. I was in this cell alone. To attempt to talk to another prisoner, I had to scream loudly. This was where I would spend the next 12 years.

For the first few weeks, the shock was terrible and so overwhelming that I couldn't handle it. I was now confined in a space the size of a bathroom that was empty, gray and solid cement. All the privileges and freedom I earned in New Mexico were utterly removed from my existence and I was living, but felt like I was dead.

Several days after arrival, I was taken to a so-called yard for an hour of out of cell exercise. To my dismay, I was placed in another gray box that had half a fence for a roof. I could not see anything except the sky. I was only allowed in this different gray box alone.

I was in my cell 24 hours a day, six days a week. One hour per week I was allowed out of the gray box. Every day I was trapped alone, without any human contact, staring at gray walls. Days went by where I didn't speak a single word. I had no outside stimuli. The librarian who was supposed to bring books around rarely did. Day after day this went on, with my only hope that they would eventually transfer me back to a regular prison.

After being at Tamms for several months, correctional officers began notifying the mental health department about me. I was not eating, had been losing weight, and according to

the reports I have seen since, I spent all my time sitting in the corner of the gray box staring at the walls. Frankly, I don't remember this period at all. I have blacked it out of my mind. The psychologist's notes also state that when I was asked how I was doing, tears ran down my face.

It is important to note that prior to Tamms, I had been incarcerated for 16 years, and throughout that period I never was treated for any mental illness, and was never under the care of any mental health professionals. After a few months at Tamms, the loss of human contact, and indeed, any meaning in life had taken hold of me and was pulling me down. I was being seen weekly by mental health staff, and within a year I was prescribed psychotropic medications for the first time in my life. I was placed on four different medications and was seen by a mental health therapist every other week. Despite this treatment, I was still unwell.

When I asked a mental health care worker if she could help me deal with the problems I was having from being locked in solitary confinement, she openly told me she had no idea how to help me. She stated that she knew of no course to teach mental health workers how to relate to the conditions I was forced to endure, and she did not know how to treat those held in solitary for prolonged periods of time. She went on to say that she was trying to learn from the men being held at Tamms so that someday she would be better able to treat others that are sent to solitary.

I developed severe mental problems from the gray box. After being in solitary for a while, I had an eerie lack of sensation in my body. I cut myself just to feel something. Starvation after a while stopped hurting and it began actually feeling good to me. I ran barefoot on the cold concrete for hours till my feet burned, just to be able to feel that burning. I began pacing between 15 and 18 hours a day. This became so bad that on many occasions a nurse had to cut open blood blisters on the bottom of my feet caused by all the excessive pacing.

Every night before bed, I got down on my knees and prayed that I would die in my sleep, yet God's will was not mine. I couldn't sleep, and during this period got no more than 16 hours of sleep *a week*. Day after day, all I saw was gray walls and over time, my whole world became the gray box.

My downward spiral continued and I became more and more depressed. In 2000, I attempted to hang myself. I made no note nor told anyone. I just got so tired of the nothingness that I had lost the will to live. I lost hope, even though I was scheduled to be released in a couple years. The sense of being utterly abandoned by the world took over me: the gray box had taken control.

In 2010, I was scheduled for release on June 29. I was taking four types of psychotropic medications, and for months I asked for help to prepare me for release—any form of treatment or help to get me ready to be around people again. At this point, I had not been around anyone for *twelve years*. The idea that I was about to be released to the street was terrifying. But no treatment was offered. In fact, I was isolated and kept in solitary until the day of my release. All my medications stopped. Upon my release, I was sent home without any medication or even a prescription. I received no therapy to help me adjust.

I spent 12 years in solitary confinement and I have never been told why I was placed there. I am a human being and every day I still struggle with the trauma of being held in that gray box. I can't take the train or a bus because of the risk of having a panic attack. I wake up screaming at night, afraid they are taking me back there. I still fear daily that my life is unreal and I am actually still in that gray box—what if I have gone completely mad and all this is only happening in my mind? What if the human need for companionship has driven me so crazy that I

am actually only living in my head? This is a fear that I live with. The gray box is always taunting me.

Some may view me as a success story. But very few former prisoners are able to have jobs such as mine at the Uptown People's Law Center. There, my supervisor and coworkers know about the traumatization of solitary confinement. They understand when the stress gets to me and I decompensate, start to hallucinate, and need to go lock myself in a room in my mother's basement.

In solitary, I went days, weeks, months, pacing back and forth like a zombie. This is recognized as a sign of severe mental illness when exhibited by animals in zoos, yet we allow people to suffer this way. That I spent 12 years in such conditions in America, the supposed land of the free, is appalling. Solitary confinement traumatizes people and does not make prisoners able to easily reintegrate into their communities upon their release. Solitary isn't good for prisoners *or* society at large. The UN recognizes solitary confinement as torture and recommends that more than 15 days of it be prohibited.ⁱ Solitary confinement in my opinion is worse than being beaten. After five years of so-called freedom, not a day goes by that I am truly free—not a day goes by that I am not in that gray box. I advise that we end the use of solitary confinement in the United States.

Sincerely,

Brian Nelson
Prisoners' Rights Coordinator
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Citations

ⁱ As stated by UN Special Rapporteur On Torture, Juan E. Méndez, in “Solitary confinement should be banned in most cases, UN expert says,” <https://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40097>