

Bill could end extended stays in solitary confinement in Va. prisons

By Katie King
Staff Writer

RICHMOND — Natasha White was baffled as she watched many Americans struggle with quarantine restrictions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

She had experienced another kind of isolation — solitary confinement — so much worse in prison.

“Solitary confinement is a 1,000 times more traumatic than that,” said White, who spent four years in solitary at a New York prison before being released in 2016.

“You don’t have the luxury of your home or the people quarantining with you.”

The Richmond resident said some of her fellow prisoners in solitary would self-mutilate so they could go to the clinic and interact

with another human.

White, coordinator for the Virginia Coalition on Solitary Confinement, is now among those pushing state legislators to support legislation banning long-term stays in solitary.

The bill, introduced by Sen. Joe Morrissey, D-Richmond, would prohibit the use of isolated confinement in state and juvenile correctional facilities for longer than 15 days per each 60-day cycle. It defines isolated confinement as the placing of an incarcerated person in a cell alone for 20 hours or more per day.

The bill passed the state Senate earlier this month and is awaiting action this week in the House Committee on Public Safety.

Kim Bobo, executive director of Virginia Inter-

faith Center for Public Policy, said she is hopeful the bill will pass. The VICPP is a nonpartisan coalition of various faiths that work together for economic, racial and social justice.

“We have met multiple times with legislators, and I think many understand that it’s bad for people in the prisons, for their families and for the prison staff because people come out [of solitary] with more issues than when they go in,” Bobo said.

Contending that the United Nations considers prolonged solitary confinement to be a form of torture, Bobo said she does not believe the government should be allowed to do so.

The ACLU of Virginia is also backing the bill.

“Solitary confinement is

torture, ineffective, inhumane, costly, outdated, and unwelcome in Virginia,” the organization tweeted on Tuesday.

During a Senate committee meeting last month, Morrissey told legislators the bill would allow for a variety of exceptions, including situations where the prisoner volunteered to stay in solitary or where they were deemed a threat to themselves or others.

The senator added a number of other states have abolished long-term stays.

“They have been successful, not only successful in helping those individuals in solitary confinement, but the fiscal impact decreased substantially,” he said.

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