

Chair Prozanski, Vice Chair Thatcher, members of the committee,

My name is KC Lewis, and I am the managing attorney for the Mental Health Rights Project with Disability Rights Oregon. I am here today to give you an update on work that has been going on over the interim looking at the policies of the Oregon Department of Corrections regarding the practice known as segregated housing or solitary confinement.

I want to begin this presentation by acknowledging someone who wasn't able to be here today but has been crucial to the work we have all been doing. Meesha Blair, a constituent of Representative Pam Marsh and a volunteer with NAMI Southern Oregon, has been working tirelessly on this issue since before our work group came together, and has been a powerful advocate and voice for those affected by these practices throughout our discussions. I hope that she is able to join us at a later hearing to talk about her experiences and the work that we have done.

We have grappled with difficult questions in this committee, around a practice that has been decried as torture by the United Nations but has become a cornerstone of incarceration throughout the US. A group of stakeholders including the Department of Corrections, Corrections Employees, civil rights groups, lawyers who have represented adults in custody, and people who have lived experience in solitary confinement or having family members in solitary confinement have met for the better part of the past year, trying to untangle the moral and logistical issues around being a state that employs segregated housing as a punishment for adults in custody, and how we can move away from that punishment-based model toward one that will improve safety and well-being for both Adults in Custody and staff, as we have seen in states like Colorado and is in the process of happening in Washington, New York, and New Jersey.

These have been raw and emotional conversations, and I appreciate all of the stakeholders for coming to them with open minds and hearts. Solitary confinement can have horrific effects on the mental health of those who endure it, and for people who have been through that to be willing to unpack their trauma again in front of a committee is an enormous burden to put on them and an enormous gift that they are granting us. This isn't going to be an easy problem for us to solve, but we can't look away from it.

Today you are going to hear from representatives from the Oregon Department of Corrections, who have been working closely with us in this group and who can speak to the current state of segregated housing in Oregon. And you will hear from people who have experienced solitary confinement, in both Oregon's prisons and its jails, so that you can understand that the practice we are talking about is not some abstract thing, but a real experience that does real harm, particularly to people already living with mental illness. Our concept is still being worked upon, but I hope that the information we provide you today helps to give you the understanding you need for the conversations to come. Thank you.