

Testimony by Anthony C. Graves

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Subcommittee on The Constitution, Civil Rights & Human Rights

“Reassessing Solitary Confinement: The Human Rights, Fiscal and Public Safety Consequences”
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My name is Anthony Graves and I am death row exonoree number 138. I was wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death in Texas back in 1992, where my nightmare began. Like all death row inmates, I was kept in solitary confinement. I lived under some of the worst conditions imaginable with the filth, the food, the total disrespect of human dignity. I lived under the rules of a system that is literally driving men out of their minds. I was one week away from my 27th birthday when I was arrested, and this emotional torture took place for the next 18.5 years. I survived the torture by believing in my innocence and hoping that they would make it right. My life was saved, but those 18.5 years were no way to live.

I lived in a small 8 by 12 foot cage. I had a steel bunk bed, with a very thin plastic mattress and pillow that you could only trade out once a year. By the time a year comes around, you've been virtually sleeping on the steel itself. I have back problems as a result. I had a steel toilet and sink that were connected together, and it was positioned in the sight of male and female officers. They would walk the runs and I would be in plain view while using the toilet.

I had a small shelf that I was able to use as a desk to write on. This was the same shelf that I ate at. There was a very small window up at the top of the back wall. In order to see the sky or the back of the building you would have to roll your plastic mattress up to stand on. I had concrete walls that were always peeling with old dull paint. It's the image of an old abandoned one room project apartment.

I lived behind a steel door that had two small slits in it, the space replaced with iron mesh wire, which was dirty and filthy. Those slits were cut out to communicate with the officers that were right outside your door. There was a slot that's called a pan hole and that's how you would receive your food. I had to sit on my steel bunk like a trained dog while the officer delivered my food tray. He would take a steel crow bar and stick it into the metal lock on the pan hole, it would fall open, which then allowed the officer to place your tray in the slot. Afterward, he then steps back, which was the signal for me to get off the bunk and retrieve my food. This is no different from the way we train our pets.

The food lacks the proper nutrition, because it is either dehydrated when served to you or perhaps you'll find things like rat feces or a small piece of broken glass. When escorted to the infirmary I would walk by the kitchen and see an inmate cooking the food and sweating into it. The inmates who do have a little support from the outside usually try to only eat the food they can purchase from the prison commissary.

There is no real medical care. After I was exonerated and able to go to a doctor, I was told that the food I had been eating caused me to have over 13 percent plaque in my veins, which can cause strokes, heart attacks, and aneurysms. I had no television, no telephone, and most importantly, I had no physical contact with another human being for at least 10 of the 18 years I was incarcerated. Today I have a hard time being around a group of people for long periods of time without feeling too crowded. No one can begin to imagine the psychological effects isolation has on another human being.

I was subjected to sleep deprivation. I would hear the clanging of metal doors throughout the night, an officer walking the runs and shining his flash light in your eyes, or an inmate kicking and screaming because he's losing his mind. Guys become paranoid, schizophrenic, and can't sleep because they are hearing voices. I was there when guys would attempt suicide by cutting themselves, trying to tie a sheet around their neck or overdosing on their medication. Then there were the guys that actually committed suicide.

I will have to live with these vivid memories for the rest of my life. I would watch guys come to prison totally sane and in three years they don't live in the real world anymore. I know a guy who would sit in the middle of the floor, rip his sheet up, wrap it around himself and light it on fire. Another guy would go out in the recreation yard, get naked, lie down and urinate all

over himself. He would take his feces and smear it all over his face as though he was in military combat. This same man was executed; on the gurney and he was babbling incoherently to the officers, “I demand that you release me soldier, this is your captain speaking.” These were the words coming out of a man's mouth, who was driven insane by the prison conditions, as the poison was being pumped into his arms. He was ruled competent to be executed.

I knew guys who dropped their appeals; not because they gave up hope on their legal claims but because of the intolerable conditions. I was able to visit another inmate before he was executed. I went there to lift his spirits and he ended up telling me that he was ready to go, and that I am the one who is going to have to keep dealing with this madness. He would rather die than continue existing under such inhumane conditions.

Solitary confinement does one thing, it breaks a man's will to live and he ends up deteriorating. He's never the same person again. Then his mother comes to see her son sitting behind plexiglass, whom she hasn't been able to touch in years, and she has to watch as her child deteriorates right in front of her eyes. This madness has a ripple effect. It doesn't just affect the inmate; it also affects his family, his children, his siblings and most importantly his mother.

I have been free for almost two years and I still cry at night, because no one out here can relate to what I have gone through. I battle with feelings of loneliness. I've tried therapy but it didn't work. The therapist was crying more than me. She couldn't believe that our system was putting men through this sort of inhumane treatment.

I haven't had a good night sleep since my release. My mind and body are having a hard time making the adjustment. I have mood swings that cause emotional break downs. Solitary confinement makes our criminal justice system the criminal.

It is inhumane and by its design it is driving men insane. I am living amongst millions of people in the world today, but most of the time I feel alone. I cry at night because of this feeling. I just want to stop feeling this way, but I haven't been able to.

End of Testimony