June 13, 2012

Senator Dick Durbin, Senator Lindsey Graham and other members of the Senate Judiciary Sub- committee on Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights. My name is Barbara Fair and I reside in Connecticut and I want to thank you for the opportunity to come before you and present written testimony on the issues of Solitary Confinement and its fiscal, human rights and public safety consequences. I am elated to witness in my lifetime congressional hearings to address this very serious matter plaguing America. I will not belabor you with statistics and research because I am certain you will receive plenty of data. Many have intellectualized, researched and written on the subject long before this hearing. I joined a Stopmax campaign on the issue at least 10 years ago and addressed it in my state of Connecticut many times. Unfortunately it didn’t rise to the level of concern it should have.

I come to you from a different perspective. I come to speak to the experience of a mother whose son was placed at the tender age of seventeen in Connecticut’s Northern institution, a super-max facility.

I can‘t tell how my son endured the psychological torture yet I can tell you about the persistent mental health problems he has experienced since and I can tell you how traumatic it was for me knowing my son was being held like a caged animal in a tomb like cell with no physical interaction with another and no environmental stimulation for the mind. I can tell you that when my son was placed in Northern on his 17th birthday I was a complete wreck and fought with everything that I could think of to get him removed. I can tell you how much pain I was in when I first visited him. He was a mere teen still developing physically , socially and emotionally. He was brought to the visiting room chained like an animal , wrist, feet and belly and then chained to the phone booth while we talked. I wanted to just hug him so he could experience human touch but I couldn’t because he was on the other side of plexiglass. It took everything in me to keep the tears from flowing. I didn’t want him to feel what I saw. I can tell you how I spent countless nights either lying awake or being awakened in the middle of the night with panic attacks, sweating and having difficulty breathing as a result of knowing my son was being treated in such a cruel manner. I can tell you how I sensed my son sobbing and pleading for me to save him from the torture. I can tell you of the delusional state he was in once released. I can tell you the cruelty included not allowing him pictures of his family which I sent him so he wouldn’t lose focus on the fact he had a family on the outside who cared about him. I needed him to know that he had to hang onto his sanity with everything he had in him and I would be doing all that I could to get him released and assure him at some point this torture would end. His siblings never knew what he was going through. I didn’t want them in the same kind of pain I was in, wondering how anyone could do this to another human being let alone a young teen and a citizen of this “free” society.

I may never know the true impact of this experience on his developing mind but I do know my son has never been the same. The son who went into prison emotionally sound returned months later with psychiatric problems that persist to this day. Ten years after he continues to suffer serious mental illness which have included multiple hospitalizations. It simply tears me apart. I often question how does a civil and humane society allow this to occur? This is just a glimpse of what solitary confinement can do.

As stated in the beginning I am elated that someone is finally paying attention to this crisis. As an activist for social justice and the founder of a grassroots organization, My Brother’s Keeper, I commend you for taking the lead (in Congress) and pray our country will be passionate in ending decades of torture in our prisons and abroad.

In the end society will reap what it sows. Our public safety will always be at risk when we decide it’s okay to cage people like animals, turn a blind eye or deaf ear to the consequences of that behavior and at some point release these individuals back into society.

The human cost far outweighs the fiscal cost of doing “business’ in this manner and we all can safely conclude that incarcerating people has become a huge business. At the same time we must ask ourselves are we willing to continue to operate as though we do so in a vacuum? Mental illness is far worse in America than other developing countries. I think it’s something we can’t continue to ignore.

We have a duty to reduce the use of solitary confinement and rid ourselves of super-max prisons altogether. They are nothing less than torture chambers. What we are doing in America defies what we say we stand for. How can we lead on human rights when we torture our own citizens?

Thank you again for the opportunity to be heard on this issue that is very dear to my heart.

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