

SOLITARY WATCH

Ridgeway Reporting Project Offers Grants to Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Journalists

The grant program is named for James Ridgeway (1936-2021), veteran investigative reporter and founder of Solitary Watch.

Solitary Watch is accepting proposals for grants to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated journalists. The project will fund work for publication in outlets nationwide, with the goal of expanding public awareness and understanding of solitary confinement and other dangerous or inhumane conditions of confinement in U.S. federal and state prisons, local and tribal jails, immigration detention centers, and juvenile facilities.

The American carceral system contains more than two million people—a population larger than all but four U.S. cities—yet it has been kept largely off-limits to the public and the press. Although prisons and jails operate in the name of the public and for its alleged protection, most Americans lack the knowledge to understand and take an informed stand on the horrific conditions in which people are locked up, including the widespread use of solitary confinement.

Solitary Watch is looking for stories that have yet to be told about all aspects of solitary confinement. Projects that focus on other carceral conditions may be considered, but strong preference will be given to stories about solitary, its effects on incarcerated individuals and on vulnerable groups, its use in immigration detention, and its negative impact on prison and public safety. This year we are especially interested in work that addresses possible alternatives to solitary. Applicants are encouraged to think creatively about how solitary functions within the carceral system; past funded stories have included the following:

- An article on how solitary units in women's prisons provide cover for sexual abuse by staff.
- An exposé on the placement of people with mental illness in telephone booth-sized cages.
- A description of the “underground economy” that operates inside solitary confinement.
- An analysis of alternative ways to maintain prison safety without the use of solitary and harsh punishments.

These stories may have a national, state, local, or thematic focus. In addition to written work, we welcome short video and audio pieces, photo essays, and graphic narratives. We are looking for articles that qualify as **investigative journalism**, and will also consider **first-person pieces strongly supported by original reporting**. We also support **op-eds** as long as they are fact-based and point to broader issues. (Please see definitions of these genres at the end of these guidelines.) The maximum word count for the final reported pieces is 2,500 words; op-eds should be under 750 words. We do not accept proposals for books, academic articles, or creative writing projects. All material should be original and not derived from previous work.

Proposals may be submitted by individual reporters and teams, and also by small newsrooms (especially nonprofit newsrooms) who may need additional support to undertake this subject—as long as at least one member of the team is incarcerated or formerly incarcerated. We encourage proposals from journalists working in local areas where these types of stories receive little coverage.

Projects to receive grants will be chosen by award-winning prison journalist Juan Moreno Haines, former senior editor of the *San Quentin News* and Editor-in-Chief at Solitary Watch, in collaboration with other Solitary Watch staff. Support with editing and placing stories in publications will be provided by Solitary Watch, as will assistance to incarcerated reporters seeking data and other research materials not available in prison. Recipients will be asked to provide Solitary Watch with a reporting plan for approval followed by first drafts of their work for feedback.

Application Instructions for Grants from the Ridgeway Reporting Project

DEADLINE: The application deadline for this round of grants has been extended to **November 1, 2026**.

Please send only the following materials. Currently incarcerated journalists may submit their applications via a contact on the outside, or may send their typed or handwritten application materials to the following address (please allow extra time for delays in prison mail): **Ridgeway Reporting Project, Solitary Watch, PO Box 11374, Washington, DC 20008**. Others should send their materials by email as Word or PDF attachments to journalism@solitarywatch.org.

1. A proposal including:

- Name(s) of reporter(s)
- Mailing address and/or email and phone number
- Medium (print, video, etc) and length of proposed project
- A description of your project (300 words)
- A description of your reporting plan (300 words), including:
 - Timeline (estimated completion of 1st draft, 2nd draft, final draft)
 - Estimated final word count
 - Lede and nut graf: your potential first and second paragraph of the article, which will open the story and explain your central idea
 - What you plan to investigate
 - People you intend to interview
 - Information you'll need from the outside (research or FOIA/public information requests)
 - Anticipated reporting expenses
 - Ideas for possible media outlets to which your project can be pitched
- A professional biography of up to 150 words
- Drafts submitted without all of the above will not be considered.

2. One to two work samples, preferably published (links will be accepted).

Grant amounts will reflect the length and demands of the projects; most grants will be in the range of \$500 to \$2,000. Grant recipients will be notified and announced in early December 2026.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to review your proposal.

As noted above, the Ridgeway Reporting Project funds the following categories of work:

Investigative journalism is an in-depth form of reporting that examines a specific issue or subject to uncover information not known to the public. It uses methods such as research, interviews, data analysis, and public records requests. Unlike some other forms of journalism, investigative reporting typically does not focus on the author but instead presents findings in a clear, factual manner. The narrative structure of an investigative article generally begins with a compelling human story or striking revelation (lede), then lays out the essential core of the story (nut graf), weaves together detailed pieces of evidence to connect individual cases to broader systemic implications, before tying the story together in a conclusion. Investigative journalism goes beyond daily reporting or firsthand experience and therefore takes more time, typically several months. The purpose of investigative reporting is to serve the public interest, expose issues that affect communities, and establish accountability.

First-person reported articles: This type of piece resembles investigative journalism in many ways. It addresses a specific aspect of or angle on solitary confinement, and it should include research and factual material as well as interviews with incarcerated people and/or others. The difference is that it can be written in the first person, and can include the author's own experiences and observations. *However*, work that is purely a personal essay or memoir cannot be considered, and should instead be submitted for our Voices from Solitary series. (Send to Voices from Solitary, PO Box 11374, Washington, DC 20008 or email to valerie@solitarywatch.org. Payment ranges from \$300-\$500.)

Op-eds present an informed personal opinion on a specific, timely topic, offering readers a distinctive and persuasive perspective. They are typically written by individuals with expertise in the subject, whether that expertise stems from firsthand experience, professional work, or academic research. For writers who are incarcerated, your lived experience inside prison serves as expertise—you possess firsthand knowledge of incarceration, which gives you a unique and credible perspective on how certain policies affect people in prison. Op-eds are concise, usually ranging from 600 to 800 words. Their structure includes a compelling hook (or lede) to capture the reader's attention, a clear thesis that states the central argument, body paragraphs that provide two to four pieces of supporting evidence (such as data, personal experience, scholarship, expert opinion, or logical reasoning), and a conclusion that reinforces the argument and often includes a call to action.