

NEWS RELEASE

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Lawsuit Seeks to End Physical and Psychological Abuse of People with Mental Illness Incarcerated in Northern Correctional Institution

Disability Rights Connecticut (DRCT) sued the Connecticut Department of Correction (DOC) today for its continuing physical and psychological abuse of people with mental illness incarcerated at Northern Correctional Institution, the state's only supermax prison, located in Somers, Connecticut.

DRCT seeks a court order barring the admission of prisoners with mental illness to Northern and the DOC's continued use of prolonged isolation and in-cell shackling of people with mental illness at Northern. DRCT is represented in the suit by the ACLU of Connecticut, Yale Law School's Lowenstein International Human Rights Law Clinic, and Morrison & Foerster.

"Nobody should be subjected to degrading and inhumane confinement, especially those whose behavior can only be addressed by treatment and rehabilitation, not humiliation and infliction of mental and physical pain, and disability discrimination," said Deborah Dorfman, Executive Director at DRCT.

DRCT's Complaint details the horrors of prolonged isolation and in-cell shackling on people with mental illness incarcerated at Northern. The allegations describe the DOC's isolation of people with mental illness, among others, at Northern in small concrete cells for 22-24 hours per day where they "live in a near total social and sensory deprivation." Their only daylight comes through a narrow slit at the back of their cells, and "meaningful social interaction is non-existent."

The lawsuit, filed in federal court against the DOC, Acting DOC Commissioner Angel Quiros, and Northern Warden Roger Bowles, alleges that the DOC's use of prolonged isolation and in-cell shackling of people with mental illness who are incarcerated at Northern constitutes cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution and disability discrimination under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

The DOC also subjects people with mental illness, among others, to in-cell shackling where their hands and legs are cuffed and then tethered together for 24 hours or even days at a time — even for minor disciplinary actions which are often manifestations of their mental illness. The DOC often leaves shackled people with mental illness in freezing, unsanitary "strip" cells that are sometimes covered with urine and feces. Many have been physically scarred from their repeated in-cell shackling.

"Northern staff chained me up more than 50 times, often with the chain so short I had to bend or crouch the whole time," said Tyrone Spence, whose experience with prolonged isolation and in-cell shackling is described in DRCT's Complaint. Mr. Spence survived multiple suicide crises while at Northern. "Now, just the sight of handcuffs can give me debilitating anxiety. Those years at Northern made me feel like I'd lost my humanity. I don't want anyone else to have to experience what I've been through."

"People who are incarcerated are people with lives, health, and dignity that matter. The state's inhumane treatment of people with mental illness at Northern Correctional Institution violates the law

and shocks the conscience. It is cruel, discriminatory, and unconstitutional, and it must end,” said Elana Bildner, staff attorney at the ACLU of Connecticut.

“The state-sanctioned policies and practices described in the complaint are known to cause severe, long-lasting physical and psychological harm,” said Ify Chikezie, member of the Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic. “The lawsuit seeks an end to these egregious abuses.”

Northern Correctional Institution opened in 1995 and for years has been the subject of lawsuits and sustained advocacy opposition. In 2020, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture condemned the use of solitary confinement as likely tantamount to torture. Since its founding, Northern has disproportionately incarcerated Black and Latinx people, and more than 84 percent of people incarcerated at Northern today are Black or Latinx.