



SENIORS FOR SOCIAL ACTION (ONTARIO)

Editorial

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

March 18, 2024

Solitary confinement – it is a term we hear used often when it comes to prisoners, and it has disastrous psychological and physical effects. National and international organizations, experts, and concerned citizens have raised this issue repeatedly in the media (CBC News, 2022). In 2019 the Federal government passed Bill C-83 putting an end to the practice of solitary confinement in prisons (Canadian Press, 2022).

But there is another kind of solitary confinement that is equally punishing, One that is experienced by low-income, isolated seniors. We live alone (Canadian Press, 2022). Some of us have no family and, thanks to attrition, few remaining friends. Our health is failing. Many of us live with disabilities. Some of us are care-givers, supporting older parents or partners. Many more have outlived their savings. We spend almost every one of the days and nights we have left alone. Christmas, birthdays, national holidays - unacknowledged and uncelebrated. Alone.

Our governments at every level have admitted that this is "cause for concern". We have been assessed and studied ad nauseam. Papers and scholarly articles have been written. Commissions and focus groups formed. Funds supposedly allocated.

But nothing changes.

These same governments have decreed that solitary confinement - for prisoners - is essentially "cruel and unusual punishment" and should be limited to 15 days (CBC News, 2017). We would be grateful to share that sentence. Currently we are condemned to death. No doubt also alone. We've asked for help. Begged. Pleaded. Demanded. Wept.

But offers of assistance are thin on the ground. And, all too often, what is offered is not what we need. The 'phone never rings. No mail arrives. This is our reality.

Interminable day follows endless night. We can barely tell the difference. Week days, weekends - all the same.

“But”, we are assured, “things are changing. Systems are being put in place.” “Procedures that will make your life more comfortable. Less complicated. Easier to bear.” Promises are trumpeted - in commercials on radio and TV, in brochures and multimedia ads. On podcasts and web sites. Personalized letters are mailed, often signed by high-flying politicians whose names we recognize - the same ones who ignore our letters and e-mails.

Doctors and hospitals are on-board. Social services and volunteer agencies, too. Surveys are sent out and filled in. Consumer panels are consulted. Results extolled (Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health, 2024).

Year after year after year - all paid for by our taxes. Yet nothing changes.

HERE IS SOME ADVICE FROM THE EXPERTS - US

- Stop taking the scattershot approach, treating seniors as if we are isolated islands of need. We are a bloc. A voting bloc - one which is growing exponentially year by year.
- Start with a senior registry - one that's required reading for every senior services agency in every locale.
- List all seniors seeking assistance, along with the specific services they require, on this system.
- Stop the duplication of services between agencies. So many agencies are eager to help. Each one has its own ideas of what that help should be. And each agency assesses every client it tries to serve. This process, which a central registry would obviate, exhausts and frustrates seniors and wastes time for the social workers involved. I have been approached by many agencies over the past few years. Each new one assesses me using, as far as I can tell, the same criteria as all the others. Seniors are, tired, weak, vulnerable. Our time is short. Constantly answering the same questions from so many different sources, only adds to our exhaustion.
- Each agency apparently offers the same services. In an era of increasing specialization, this seems strange to me. When we try to access the services we actually need, all too often they have waiting lists, sometimes one to two years long. We may not be around that long! Or the service may be discontinued due to lack of funding, staffing or facilities.

The government is supposedly aware of these lacks and has purportedly allocated funds to address the issue - funds that never, ever seem to reach the front-line workers who are responsible for delivering the services. Where does the money go? I posed that question to many people while writing this article. No-one had an answer.

THE SILVER TSUNAMI IS A FACT

We, the advance guard, are realizing that, in Canada at least, it is currently easier to achieve an assisted death than to receive help in actually living what's left of our days in any kind of comfort.

Why?

REFERENCES

- Canadian Coalition for Seniors Mental Health. (2024). Social isolation and loneliness. <https://ccsmh.ca/projects/social-isolation-and-loneliness-in-older-adults/>
- Canadian Press. (June 16, 2022). Prisons still routinely violate prisoner rights with solitary confinement. <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2022/06/16/news/prisons-routinely-violate-prisoner-rights-solitary-confinement>
- Canadian Press. (August 17, 2022). Increased loneliness, isolation are side effects of inflation for seniors, expert says. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/inflation-sherwood-park-seniors-calgary-1.6553579>
- CBC News. (June 19, 2017). Liberals set 15 day limit on solitary confinement of federal prisoners. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/corrections-solitary-confinement-segregation-1.4167555>
- CBC News. (April 7, 2022). Canadian inmates still face isolation amounting to torture, experts say. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/federal-inmates-solitary-confinement-enquete-1.6410882>
- Please see original Op Ed in the Toronto Star, January 21, 2018. Too Many Seniors Sentenced to a Life of Solitary Confinement by Jennifer Brown. https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/too-many-seniors-sentenced-to-a-life-of-solitary-confinement/article_77afb516-02ae-5dfe-a602-8f166da8bb00.html

Jennifer Brown is a member of Seniors for Social Action Ontario's Editorial Committee, a writer, and former college instructor. She lives in a long-term care facility in Toronto where she continues to fight for the rights of elders.

Comments on this and other editorials can be sent to seniorsactionontario@gmail.com where they will be forwarded to the author.