

South Carolina prisons a step ahead of president's new solitary confinement policies

By Emma Dumain and Maya T. Prabhu Jan 30 2016 1:00 pm



MacDougall Correctional Institution in Ridgeville in 2010. South Carolina facilities are steps ahead of the changes to solitary confinement policies outlined last week by President Barack Obama. Wade Spees/Staff

COLUMBIA — South Carolina corrections officials say they were

already limiting solitary confinement for juveniles and adults prior to President Barack Obama's announcement to make similar changes at federal institutions.

Obama said he will ban solitary confinement as a form of punishment for juvenile and low-level offenders in federal prisons, hoping it will serve as a model nationally for state and local lockups.

In South Carolina, the Department of Juvenile Justice already banned isolation for disciplinary reasons, said department spokesman Eric Rousey.

"Juveniles are currently only put in isolation at DJJ when they pose a clear and present threat to other juveniles or to themselves, or when they pose a serious security risk," he said.

S.C. Department of Corrections Director Bryan Stirling said the department made several changes to the solitary confinement policy after a lawsuit mediation agreement was reached with the group Protection and Advocacy for People with Disabilities.

A judge in 2014 ruled against the Department of Corrections in a suit the organization filed accusing the department of failing to provide effective counseling and an overreliance on tactics such as isolation and pepper spray to subdue unruly mentally ill prisoners.

"As part of the agreement from the mental health lawsuit we're limiting the time that people were in segregation," Stirling said, something the department has been implementing for about a year.

The Corrections Department reduced the number of people in restricted housing from 1,620 on Jan. 1, 2015, to 828 as of Jan. 22.

Officials also have implemented the Step Down Program, a process that lasts at least nine months and is designed to move long-term solitary confinement inmates slowly and safely into the general population, Stirling said.

Both Juvenile Justice and the Corrections Department continue to use solitary confinement for security reasons when an inmate could potentially harm themselves or someone else, something Stirling said is incredibly important to him.

“I still believe in the safety of officers and other staff,” he said. “I take it very seriously if you assault one of my staff members. Your freedoms would be limited if you did that.”

Corrections Department spokeswoman Stephanie Givens said the changes to solitary confinement policies are part of a nationwide culture shift. “We have been on the forefront of this issue,” she said. “We made these changes before anything has come to light (nationally).”

In Washington, a bipartisan coalition of lawmakers is scrambling to pass a sentencing reform bill by the year’s end. The Senate’s blueprint includes a provision limiting solitary confinement for juvenile inmates in federal prisons.

U.S. Sen. Tim Scott, a South Carolina Republican who is following the prison issue, wants to see more details, spokesman Sean

Conner said. “He’s specifically interested in how it would fit into the broader, ongoing conversations about criminal justice reform.”

Lindsey Graham, South Carolina’s senior Republican U.S. senator and a co-sponsor of the criminal justice bill, said Thursday he hadn’t yet studied the text of the executive order closely.

Advocates for overhauling the criminal justice system say it’s necessary to codify Obama’s changes into law. Without enacted legislation, some fear a subsequent president could come into office and override the president’s executive order.