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COMMENTS IN SUPPORT OF 16-H 7481 – HUMANE ALTERNATIVES TO LONG-TERM SOLITARY CONFINEMENT
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The ACLU of Rhode Island supports efforts to minimize the use of solitary confinement. Solitary confinement is an expensive, fundamentally inhumane practice that jeopardizes, rather than increases, public safety. The time has come for Rhode Island to stop relying on solitary confinement to correct behavior, and instead find new, more effective ways to ensure our communities remain safe and secure.

The vast majority of prisoners will be released back into the community, and normal human contact with the outside world is crucial to successful re-entry. It is in our best interest as a community to ensure that the time spent incarcerating someone is used to improve their connection with the community and maximize their chances at reintegrating successfully. Yet, directly undercutting that goal, we routinely cloister individuals in solitary confinement 23 hours a day, for weeks or even months at a time, often as punishment for very low-risk offenses. Despite the perception that solitary confinement is used as punishment for only the most serious offenders, the ACLU is aware of individuals who have received up to a year in segregation for disciplinary infractions related to drug addiction and mental health issues.

The effect of this isolation can be devastating. Solitary confinement can create or exacerbate pre-existing mental illnesses, and can have lasting psychological effects even on individuals who had no mental illness prior to their alienation; courts have repeatedly held that long-term isolation for the severely mentally ill is cruel and unusual punishment. These individuals, many of whom pose no threat to the safety of prison staff or other prisoners, leave solitary confinement alienated and disconnected, and then we expect them to reintegrate well into society as a whole. Such a system does nothing to rehabilitate those we incarcerate, and leaves us all less protected.

At the same time, the cost nationwide of caring for a person in solitary confinement is often double that of the cost to incarcerate a person generally. The continued use of solitary confinement asks taxpayers to pay more for less public safety. It is time Rhode Island found another way.

For all these reasons, and the ACLU of Rhode Island supports limiting the use of solitary confinement, and urges the committee to do the same.