

Wisconsin prison officials begin force feedings as solitary confinement protest continues

The Department of Corrections has obtained court orders to force feed three inmates participating in a hunger strike aimed at ending long-term solitary confinement

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Coburn Dukehart/Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism

Chance Zombor, 36, leads a protest against the practice of solitary confinement at a rally in Madison Tuesday. Zombor has spent time in isolation at Waupun and Oshkosh correctional institutions. About 30 people marched to the Wisconsin Department of Corrections headquarters to deliver a letter arguing against the use of solitary confinement in Wisconsin prisons. Along the way they shouted "Our passion for freedom is stronger than their prisons!"

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The state Department of Corrections is force feeding at least three inmates as a hunger strike aimed at ending a form of solitary confinement that can go on for years — even decades — continues [for a third week](#).

Although the DOC has detailed the medical conditions of the hunger strikers in publicly available petitions, the agency refuses to confirm that it has obtained court orders to force feed inmates, citing medical privacy issues. Spokesman Tristan Cook did not immediately respond to questions about how often and on whom the department has used force feeding.



Wisconsin Department of Corrections

Columbia Correctional Institution inmate Norman C. Green, who also goes by the name Prince Aturn-Ra Uhuru Mutawakki, says he has been in a version of solitary confinement in Wisconsin for 18 years. In a 2012 blog post he said long-term isolation, known as administrative confinement, “incinerates the mind and spoils the soul.” On Wednesday, the Wisconsin Department of Corrections obtained a court order to begin force-feeding Green, who has been refusing food to protest the use of such long-term solitary confinement.

Court records show the agency is now force feeding Waupun Correctional Institution inmates Cesar DeLeon and LaRon McKinley Bey and Columbia Correctional Institution inmate Norman C. Green, who also goes by the name of Prince Aturn-Ra Uhuru Mutawakki.

The food refusal campaign, dubbed “Dying to Live,” which about half a dozen inmates began as early as June 5, is aimed at pressuring the state to end the practice of holding inmates for lengthy periods of time in administrative confinement, which is intended for prisoners deemed a danger to the institution.

McKinley Bey, who escaped during a jail transfer in 1987 after shooting a sheriff’s deputy, has been held in this status for at least 25 years, according to a federal [lawsuit](#) he filed in Milwaukee. He alleges such unending isolation — at least 23 hours a day alone in a cell — violates the constitutional prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment.

Roughly 100 Wisconsin inmates are being held in this type of long-term solitary confinement.

A top United Nations official has declared that such isolation beyond 15 days [is tantamount to torture](#).

On Tuesday, 30 activists gathered in front of the Department of Corrections headquarters in Madison to protest the state's continued use of administrative confinement, chanting "solitary is torture."

Protester Chance Zombor said he had spent many months in solitary confinement at Waupun and Oshkosh correctional institutions. Zombor said such isolation causes inmates to become "psychologically deranged."



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Protesters on Tuesday deliver a letter to Tristan Cook, Wisconsin Department of Corrections spokesman. The state has begun force feeding some prisoners involved in a hunger strike aimed at ending administrative confinement, a type of solitary confinement that can go on for years, even decades.

The protesters presented Cook with a letter demanding an end to the "overuse and abuse" of administrative confinement, improved mental health services for inmates in solitary confinement and other steps, including allowing inmates in this "non-punitive" status to have the same access to property, such as canteen items and TVs, that general population inmates have.

"As the public becomes aware of the torturous effect of any kind of solitary confinement longer than 15 days, you can imagine the outrage and bewilderment when they learned that we have inmates who have been in solitary for decades," according to the letter addressed to Corrections Secretary Jon Litscher.



Wisconsin Department of Corrections

Waupun Correctional Institution inmate LaRon McKinley Bey says he has been held in administrative confinement for more than 25 years. McKinley Bey is among half a dozen Wisconsin inmates participating in a hunger strike to end administrative confinement, a form of solitary confinement that can go on for years. The state got a court order to begin force-feeding him on June 17.

Cook accepted the letter and told the group that corrections officials are working on possible changes to solitary confinement, which the department calls restrictive housing. But he did not respond to requests by the activists to participate in that process.

In an email, Cook said the agency is studying several changes, including moving mentally ill inmates out of solitary and examining ways to increase out-of-cell time and increase programming and services for inmates in restrictive housing and administrative confinement.

In June 2015, the state reduced the [maximum stint in solitary confinement](#) for violating prison rules from 360 days to 90 days, with longer stints possible under certain circumstances.

But those limits do not apply to inmates deemed to be violent or hard to manage who are in administrative confinement. The status of each inmate in administrative confinement is reviewed every six months. McKinley Bey, however, charges in his lawsuit that those reviews are a “sham.”

McKinley Bey said force feeding entails being strapped into a “restraint chair” and having a tube placed in his nose to deliver liquid nutrition while an officer films the process, according to a letter he wrote to advocates dated June 19. He wrote that he, DeLeon, Green and another inmate, Joshua Scolman, “are strong, and are in it for as long as it take to make something happen.”

In the June 17 petition for a court order to force feed DeLeon, corrections officials said the inmate began refusing food on June 7 and had also begun refusing water and that he has a “history of serious hunger strikes.” The petition states that he is suffering from “moderate” malnutrition and dehydration.

“He appears weak, gaunt and has an unsteady gait,” according to the petition. “Mucous membranes are very dry.”



Wisconsin Department of Corrections

Waupun Correctional Institution inmate Cesar DeLeon is participating in a hunger strike that began in early June. Wisconsin Department of Corrections officials got a court order from Dodge County Circuit Court on June 17 to begin force-feeding DeLeon.

However, in a letter written after the order was issued, DeLeon said that “clearly the doctor exaggerated his medical report with the intent to force feed me, to dissuade me and other(s) to stop our strike.”

Inmate advocate Peg Swan said she is distressed that it took a hunger strike to highlight the problems with administrative confinement in Wisconsin’s prisons. Two states — [Colorado](#) and California — have discontinued such indefinite confinement in solitary.

“I will be rooting for the them to stop,” Swan said. “They succeeded in getting the public to think about long-term solitary, and we are pledged out here to keep the campaign going, but we don’t need them to get sick.”

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