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Legal Aid Files Class Action Lawsuit Against NYC DOC for Repeated Violations of HALT Solitary Law on Rikers Island

New Yorkers, Including Those with Disabilities, Are Regularly Held in Solitary Confinement for 23 or 24 Hours A Day

(NEW YORK, NY) - The Legal Aid Society, along with pro bono counsel Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP, filed a [class action lawsuit](#) in New York State Supreme Court against the New York City Department of Correction (DOC) for the Department's repeated violations of the [Humane Alternatives to Long-Term Solitary Confinement \(HALT\) Act](#), a landmark human rights law that limits the use of solitary confinement in prisons and jails throughout New York State.

The complaint alleges that DOC regularly violates HALT by confining people in their cells for 23 or 24 hours a day at two specific housing units on Rikers Island: a former Communicable Disease Unit in the West Facility (WF CDU) and the second floor of the North Infirmary Command (NIC). The proposed class members held in WF are not being held for medical reasons. New Yorkers housed in these units languish in cells, often for months at a time, and are denied access to congregate religious services, programming, and recreation. For them, "recreation" is merely one hour per day in a single-person cage with no equipment, activities, or opportunity for meaningful social interaction.

Many people held in these housing units are vulnerable and suffer from disabilities or otherwise qualify as members of a "Special Population" that HALT protects from placement in solitary confinement, except under very limited circumstances. Members of the special populations include people with chronic illnesses, people who rely on wheelchairs or other devices for mobility, and people with mental health disabilities including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and bipolar disorder.

Despite this, DOC continues to unlawfully hold proposed class members in solitary confinement in units where they lack adequate access to medical and mental health treatment, as well as reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities.

The lawsuit seeks to end DOC's practice of subjecting people on Rikers Island to the devastating and frequently irreversible medical and psychological consequences of solitary confinement.

"DOC's continued refusal to abide by the provisions of the HALT Act is both unlawful and inhumane," said **Veronica Vela, Supervising Attorney with the Prisoners' Rights Project at The Legal Aid Society**. "No

one, and particularly not people living with disabilities, should be locked in a cell for 23 hours a day without human contact or access to medical treatment or programs. These repeated violations of the law must end immediately, and DOC must be prevented from inflicting the pain and trauma of solitary confinement on anyone in its custody.”

Plaintiffs:

- **Arnold Catala** has been housed in WF CDU since April 2025, and each day is confined in his cell for 23 to 24 hours. Mr. Catala, who has high blood pressure, asthma, and a prosthetic leg, among other medical conditions, has also not been receiving medication or doctors’ visits. He is 37 years old.
- **Cory Elder** is a 45-year-old who has been in WF CDU since July 2025 and spent several weeks there in 2024. He is confined to his cell for at least 23 hours a day. Mr. Elder, who uses a wheelchair and has epilepsy, has been deprived of outdoor recreation for weeks on end and is depressed, which he attributes to being alone in his cell all day.
- **Ben Foster** has been housed in NIC since early June 2025 and is confined to his cell for 23 to 24 hours a day. Mr. Foster, 33, is depressed and idle in his cell, with his only interaction with other people consisting of yelling through the walls of his cell or exchanging quick glimpses with other incarcerated people on his way to his daily one-hour of recreation time.
- **Jerry Young**, who is 66 years old, has been in WF CDU since January 2025. He is confined in his cell for 23 to 24 hours a day, but more often for 24 hours because outdoor recreation time is only offered to him a few times per week. Mr. Young has stomach cancer, among other conditions, and is frequently denied medical attention. He is unable to talk to any fellow detainees while in his cell unless he opens the food slot on the lower part of his door and yells out. When he is offered “recreation,” it consists only of one hour spent in a solitary cage.

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The Legal Aid Society is a nonprofit organization that exists for one simple yet powerful reason: to ensure that New Yorkers are not denied their right to equal justice because of poverty. For nearly 150 years, we have protected, defended, and advocated for those who have struggled in silence for far too long. Every day, in every borough, The Legal Aid Society changes the lives of our clients and helps improve our communities.

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