



STATE OF WASHINGTON  
**OFFICE OF THE CORRECTIONS OMBUDS**  
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**Prepared Testimony – Other Position**  
**Senate Bill 5135**  
January 23, 2023

Madam Chair, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee:

The purpose of the Office of the Corrections Ombuds (OCO) is to:

- Provide information
- Promote public awareness & understanding
- Ensure compliance with relevant statutes, rules, & policies
- Identify system issues and responses for the governor & the legislature to act upon

My invited testimony in the other position for SB 5135 Solitary Confinement, flows from the OCO's Fourth Purpose.

Educator and social theorist Paulo Freire is most well-known for his pedagogy of the oppressed theory, which includes the social teaching of the concept of praxis. Praxis means action and reflection upon the world in order to change it. As the OCO Director, my testimony today is a part of my praxis.

I know that my colleagues in the activist and legal communities and in the Department of Corrections are focused on negotiating about hours out of cell for those housed in solitary confinement. Quite honestly, I don't think it matters how many hours out someone gets if the place that they get to go to is just as bad, or maybe even worse, than the cell that they are living in.

When staff escorts an incarcerated person to the yard or shower, they are handcuffed, sometimes even with belly chains and tethered to a waist chain (like a leash) prior to movement. To go to the shower or the so-called yard, the incarcerated folks are forced to perform a modified strip search. To go to programming, to receive medical care, to visit with an attorney or a loved one in person, they must complete a full strip search.

The yards that my colleagues are talking about are concrete runs or oddly shaped rooms with old plastic-type barriers for windows into the units and tiny holes at the end of the hallway for fresh air to get in through.

In the Intensive Management Unit at Washington State Penitentiary, where the Department of Corrections is talking about housing all their long-term solitary folks, there's no looking up and seeing the sun or the sky, or even looking out and seeing a horizon. The windows in the cells are frosted, the artificial light is on all the time, and the temperature is often weirdly too hot or too cold.

I have the privilege of unfettered access to all restrictive housing units in the state. I've spent a lot of time in each of them and have spoken face-to-face with hundreds of people living months, sometimes even years, in

these conditions. Every time I leave one of these units, even if I was only there for an hour, I have a headache. If I spend the whole day in one, I most often leave with a migraine. It is not because the people living and working in the solitary units are difficult or scary. It is because the energy that is held in those poorly designed buildings is demoralizing.

It's embarrassing that we confine people in such outdated and dehumanizing restrictive housing buildings in our beautiful state.

I invite the committee members to spend a day with me in one of the solitary units. The time is ripe to do right, and our conscience calls us to be unlimited people with open minds who take logical actions. I hope we get to a place where folks get a lot more time out of their cell, but that is not enough. We need to improve the living conditions and the physical buildings too.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. If asked, the Office of the Corrections Ombuds will provide the committee with more details about the qualitative and quantitative data we have collected from people living in solitary confinement in our state's prisons.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "CRobertson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Caitlin Robertson, PhD  
Director