

Interfaith groups urge end to solitary confinement

by [Chris Lisee](#) in the [July 25, 2012](#) issue

An interfaith coalition is urging Congress to end solitary confinement, which they said is a “harmful, costly and ineffective practice.”

Muslim, Jewish and Christian faith leaders joined the National Religious Campaign Against Torture to break a 23-hour nationwide fast June 19 at a press conference in Washington following the first-ever congressional hearing on solitary confinement.

“We’re breaking our fast with a commitment that this issue is not over [and] that we’re going to give even more energy to our effort to make sure that no one has to spend time in solitary confinement,” said Richard Killmer, NRCAT’s executive director and a Presbyterian minister.

The hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights called attention to economic, safety and moral issues solitary confinement raises. Some researchers estimate more than 80,000 prisoners are held in social isolation.

The 23-hour fast represented the amount of time prisoners are typically required to spend daily in solitary confinement cells, and fasting is one of the sole forms of protest that prisoners have. Killmer said some inmates spend weeks or years confined with no natural light or meaningful contact with others, creating damaging psychological effects.

Bill Medford, director of civil and human rights for the United Methodist Church, emphasized the ethical concerns raised by solitary confinement: “This is a profound moral issue, and we have a moral obligation to uphold the sacred worth of each individual currently incarcerated,” he said.

Prison Fellowship chief of staff Dave Loudon argued that solitary confinement can degrade mental health, putting inmates at risk to themselves and others.

“These men that are in solitary confinement are deemed . . . to be too dangerous for prison. Yet on their release, many will come straight out of solitary confinement, through the gates of the prison, and into our communities without any prior preparation,” he said. —RNS