

RELEASE NEWS

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About Release News

R*elease* is a CCSU student-run publication that aims to educate and engage the general public on systemic issues regarding criminal justice, incarceration, and re-entry – the people affected by the criminal justice system and the people who serve them on both a statewide and national scale. The goal of *Release* is to put a human face on the criminal justice system through a bimonthly online publication of narrative nonfiction pieces of varying styles such as profiles, cultural spotlights, investigative reports, and information graphics.

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Segregation Semantics: Connecticut's Isolation Policy Changes

Nikki A. Sambitsky

The Connecticut Department of Corrections (DOC) is quietly reviewing its policy for segregating incarcerated people, joining a growing number of states examining alternatives to isolation. A committee of DOC staff and other corrections professionals has been studying the segregation policy for months, though the DOC provided no timetable for a final report. According to Karen Martucci, acting director of the DOC's External Affairs Division, the DOC no longer uses solitary confinement for punishment or self-protection.

"The [current Administrative Directive](#) is under review," says Martucci. "I do not want to speculate on any changes that may result in a review of our Administrative Segregation program. It is too premature."

AFSCME Local 1565 Vice President John DeVito claims the DOC has already implemented changes to their segregation policy, including more frequent showers and recreation. The guards' union plans to discuss the policy with the DOC in March, as they are unhappy with the current directive.

"AFSCME wants stricter rules for the inmates because we think [the current

regulations] are too lenient. I have been doing this job for 20 years and things change. The inmates have it a lot better than they used to."

Hope Metcalf, executive director of the Orville H. Schell, Jr. Center for International Human Rights and co-teacher at the Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic at Yale Law School, confirms that any changes the DOC is making to their Administrative Segregation policy are in line with national trends and scientific research indicating the destructive power of isolation.

"There is now widespread recognition among medical and corrections professionals that long term isolation is harmful, expensive, and counterproductive. The two [US Senate hearings](#) documented the many costs of solitary confinement. Extreme isolation causes profound disability and exacerbates mental illness...Solitary confinement has no place in a corrections system dedicated to improving public safety," says Metcalf.

"The inmates have it a lot better than they used to."

In 2012, Yale Law School's Visual Law Project produced [*The Worst of the Worst*](#), a documentary detailing the conditions of extreme isolation at Northern Correctional Institution, a supermax prison in Somers, CT, built in the 1990's alongside many similar institutions across the nation. Metcalf says the team discovered in 2010 that Northern isolated incarcerated individuals for long

"Solitary confinement has no place in a corrections system dedicated to improving public safety."

periods under debilitating conditions.

"Since the documentary's release, the DOC has made a number of important reforms, including the creation of a step down unit at Cheshire CI, reducing the total number of people in the most severe form of Administrative Segregation, and no longer automatically return[ing] men to isolation upon re-arrest. Our hope is that the DOC will build upon these important steps to see even greater changes long term."

Metcalf adds that the Connecticut DOC is among a [growing](#) number of states that are actively seeking tangible and lasting alternatives to solitary confinement. Colorado

has officially abolished isolation for mentally ill people following Colorado DOC Executive Director Rick Raemisch's [night in Administrative Segregation](#), and New York [banned](#) solitary confinement for juveniles in 2014.

"Safety for all people who live and work in prisons must be a top priority, period. But we can no longer afford to think that we can lock people up and make them disappear." ❖

From Problem to Promise: New Britain's Juvenile Review Board in Action

Joseph L. Giasullo

It isn't every day that a child of fifteen can walk into a J.C. Penney and claim whatever she wants. For Suhailey Oday that moment came once and she sought to make the most of it. With her friend as backup, Suhailey entered the department store armed with nothing but an empty bag. She would see something that caught her eye and immediately tuck it away without concern for the price. When she was through browsing and concealing the items, she tried to make a quick and easy getaway. That was until she was stopped at the entrance by an undercover mall security guard, who had been following her every move from the perfumes to the shoes and through to the lingerie section.

"I was so scared," she remembers. The security guard escorted her to J.C. Penney's secret interrogation room, where photos are taken of notorious perpetrators with the items of their fancy for the unforgiving J.C. Penney database of banned customers. Suhailey thought her life was over in that room. J.C.

Penney contacted her mother because she was a minor, and she knew there was little hope for getting out of the situation unscathed. The prospect of being in police custody comforted her more than the custody of her own mother, who would undoubtedly give her the verbal lashing of her lifetime. "The car ride home was death!" She throws her head back, remembering that moment of utter terror.

Despite all that, for Suhailey the next phone call was worse. While driving home, her mother contacted Omar McDew, Youth Advocate and Coordinator on the New Britain Juvenile Review Board (JRB). Omar has known Suhailey since she was in 7th grade. Their relationship has no secrets. She trusts and confides in him. There is little that can break such a bond – not even the call that one of his "best kids" in the youth leadership program had just been indicted for shoplifting. At the time, Suhailey was heartbroken that her mother called Omar – "What am I going to do now? Coach O. knows!" But Omar reassured

Suhailey and her hysterical mother that everything would be all right and he would handle the situation.

Omar's job diverts juvenile offenders away from courtrooms and police custody. The organization where he is an advocate, New Britain Youth and Family Services, works with the New Britain Police Department to decide which cases are handled by the JRB through a provisional process that considers the child's previous offenses and the severity of the crime. Rather than facing a judge at a juvenile court, where costly legal fees, probation, and drug testing are likely, children's fates

are decided by a group of local professionals with rehabilitation in mind. The JRB's work is contingent upon a two-way conversation between child and advocate. Omar uncovers the underlying issues that may be the driving forces behind a child's actions, and then the JRB recommends a punishment fit for the crime with a mentor to follow up with the child and the family.

Omar immediately had Suhailey's case diverted from juvenile court to his desk, where

many minor delinquent cases like larceny, fighting, and truancy pass. While Omar presented her case to the JRB and arrived at a decision, Suhailey had to go on with her normal life. She was forced to reflect on what she had done, which was punishment enough.

"When they took the picture of me at J.C. Penney was when I realized I made a big

mistake. They even took pictures of all of the stuff I took."

Ultimately, the JRB sentenced Suhailey to community service and a written letter of apology. She got off easy to say the least, but had Omar not taken the initiative to see Suhailey

through the JRB process, she could very well have found herself in front of a juvenile court, with the stigmatizing label of "juvenile delinquent" against her record until she turned 18.

Omar sat in his office as Suhailey relayed her story. The walls were lined with pictures of kids Omar has helped over the years, trophies of teams he has coached to success, cards from families who are forever grateful, and a large poster folded at the middle

*"When they took
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as if it had been transported with him wherever he has gone. It carries all of Omar's distinguished attributes as written by his co-workers, students, and JRB kids alike. One of them announces that Omar is the best, another professes his disdain for swearing, and the rest are forced into every nook and cranny of the poster. Omar looked on as Suhailey spoke. He occasionally chimed in to clarify an acronym or help her recount a specific moment, but for the most part Omar listened as the interview commenced. The things Suhailey admitted of

Although the New Britain JRB has existed since 1977, different initiatives to divert minors from the justice system have been popping up across Connecticut and the rest of the country this past decade in response to the disparaging number of children who have found themselves in trouble. These initiatives boast outstanding numbers of how many kids have avoided police officers, courtrooms, judges, and the delinquency title simply by inserting an intermediary between children and the law. Omar alone has seen a significant reduction in

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her past were tough to recall, especially in front of a stranger. Omar's presence alone gave her immense strength and fearlessness. "Omar is my motivation," she says.

Now at 21 years old, Suhailey is pursuing a degree in social work. She hopes to someday help children in an office right beside Omar's with her own pictures, cards, and posters on the wall. At home, Suhailey's 11 younger cousins look up to her. Her experiences have guided her into the role model position for her family.

The success of the JRB is a direct result of Omar's success with children like Suhailey.

the amount of children who come to him from schools in New Britain due to the high school's Right Response team, a state funded grant program that makes the effort to handle situations at school with students and parents.

Advocates of diversion initiatives in the state consist of the Juvenile Justice Alliance, the Child Health and Development Institute, Court Support Services Department, and many law enforcement agencies. Their success is due to the use of JRBs, Memorandums of Agreement between education systems and police forces, competitive grants for schools and communities that participate in the initiative,

and other tools Connecticut has at their disposal for giving children like Suhailey a second chance at living a healthy and successful life.

In reference to why she chose social work, Suhailey looked at Omar and said, “I want to be the person kids don’t have. I want to be somebody for them. I want to be somebody they can talk to.” ❖

The Wonder Drug

Carly Maher

Growing availability and training in the administration of a heroin overdose antidote has saved at least 5 lives in the state of Connecticut since October 2014.

The drug naloxone hydrochloride, marketed under the brand name “Narcan,” takes less than one minute to revive a person experiencing a life-threatening overdose. Narcan can be either injected or administered through an intranasal spray. The spray in particular is gaining popularity, as Narcan is being made available to all first responders throughout the state of Connecticut.

The prescription pill epidemic and increase in the use and prevalence of heroin have incited policy changes in an effort to preserve the lives of those struggling with addiction, the most recent of which is [Public Act 14-61](#). Signed by Governor Dannel Malloy on October 1, 2014, PA 14-61 grants immunity to anyone who administers Narcan to a person who appears to be experiencing an overdose. The “good Samaritan” cannot be held liable for any adverse reactions that may occur during that process. “The law made people more comfortable acting in a life threatening situation,” says Mary

PA 14-61 grants immunity to anyone who administers Narcan to a person who appears to be experiencing an overdose.

Kate Mason, spokesperson for the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services ([DMHAS](#)). Narcan is now in the hands of many police, firefighters, EMTs, and paramedics. Popular drug chains CVS and Walgreens have even made the product available over the counter in Rhode Island and Vermont.

Though its availability to civilians is recent, licensed health care professionals have been able to prescribe Narcan at their discretion since [Public Act 12-159](#) of 2012.

“This meant that if a person was struggling with addiction or had a history, a doctor could prescribe Narcan to a loved one,” says Mason. “A person struggling with a heroin or prescription pill addiction is not thinking about overdosing. The act was important for empowering families in case of an emergency.”

All Connecticut state troopers are now trained carriers of Narcan, but this is not true for many municipal officers.

“All Hartford cops do not carry Narcan,” says Lieutenant Gerardo Pleasant of the Hartford Police Department. “In an urban area like Hartford, response to an emergency call about an overdose usually

results in the police and paramedics arriving at the same time. In these cases, paramedics administer Narcan at the scene. Training full police departments to use Narcan would be advantageous in more rural areas of Connecticut, where there is an increased possibility that the police will be first on the scene.”

According to Connecticut Police Academy Administrator Thomas Flaherty, all emergency responders throughout the state have had opportunities to participate in Narcan trainings. Beginning in September 2014, the Connecticut Police Academy and the Connecticut Department of Public Health collaborated on a recurring program called “Train-the-Trainer” for police and firefighters to act as ambassadors to their respective departments. 34 emergency response professionals elected to participate in the first training, and 26 practitioners attended a second training held a month later.



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“The trainings are not mandatory. The police officers or firefighters who attended did so in order to educate others at their own locations,” says Flaherty.

Such preparation on the part of police officers is due to epidemic proportions of street drugs like heroin and prescription pills such as OxyContin. These natural and synthetic opioids are highly addictive and affecting more people in the state of Connecticut now than ever before.

“There is an upward trend for heroin and prescription pill use in Connecticut still. Regarding those whom we service, heroin is second only to alcohol, which has always been number one,” says Mason. Connecticut DMHAS provides support to around 110,000 people every year. In 2013, 63,000 of those people were treated for addiction to heroin.

Although Narcan is not yet available over the counter in Connecticut, the resounding response to the increasing availability of this “wonder drug” is positive. In Rhode Island, at least 8 lives have been saved by civilians administering Narcan since August 2014. With more and more people being affected by opioid abuse on the East Coast, Connecticut could be next to offer Narcan without a prescription.

These acts, policies, trainings, and the spreading of applicable education are working to eradicate the heroin and prescription pill problem in Connecticut. With the number of lives saved increasing by the month, Narcan continues to speak for itself. ❖

Death Row Stories

Carissa Bartis

Susan Sarandon is the unlikely face of capital punishment in her narration of [*Death Row Stories*](#) on CNN: a series of one-hour documentaries on people sentenced to death. This isn't the first time entertainment and criminal justice have intersected; Sarandon herself left the 1995 Oscars with an Academy Award for her portrayal of Sister Helen Prejean in *Dead Man Walking* – a film that netted a total

and truth.” Director Alex Gibney says the show “provides stark examples of the struggle between the powerful and the powerless. The stakes – life or death – couldn't be higher.” These are comments that any advocate of death penalty repeal and criminal justice reform would agree are important endeavors. But should the impact of such shows be gauged by the extent to which viewers ultimately enact

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of 4 nominations and cultivated accolades from both film critics and moviegoers.

The content is compelling. There is a wealth of material spanning decades to fill enough episodes of *Death Row Stories* for years to come, and the production value is top notch. But what is this program setting out to do? And is it succeeding?

Creator Robert Redford touts *Death Row Stories* as a series “about the search for justice

policy change? According to Sarah Craft from [*Equal Justice USA*](#), a national organization dedicated to reforming our justice system, the answer is initially “No.”

For Equal Justice's part, there is no statistical certainty that *Death Row Stories* has led to an increase in traffic to their site or interest in similar non-profit groups. However, Craft maintains that programs like *Death Row Stories* are good tools for bringing people in and getting them involved in policy discussion. “We

held a live tweeting event where we hosted screening parties for different episodes of the show,” Craft said. She praises the fact that it brought people in to the screening parties who may not have found their way to an Equal Justice event otherwise, and just “one extra body added to the cause is a great boon to the movement in general.” While these events are underway, Equal Justice is able to provide petitions – [one of which](#) Susan Sarandon supports – and awareness to projects they have on the horizon.

Craft concedes that it is “hard to draw straight lines” between shows like *Death Row Stories* and a direct influence on policy change, but she says that should not diminish its effect

“One extra body added to the cause is a great boon to the movement in general.”

as a tool for education and research. When asked if she has any qualms about their marketing or entertainment slant similar to shows like *48 Hours*, she says she does not. For where television stands with this issue, she sees the entertainment value as being necessary for bringing further viewers in.

Although those seeking quantification of *Death Row Stories*’ impact may be disappointed, its significance lies in small steps rather than great leaps. Both policy and public opinion rarely experience sea changes, and the weaknesses plaguing our justice system are too widespread and nuanced to see a shift within a few short months. But as long as the conversation continues to grow, we as a society can continue to edge toward a more just system.

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