

ACTS and Community Partners Succeed in Convincing County Legislature to Unanimously Pass Resolution Banning Solitary Confinement of Youth in Onondaga County


On Tuesday, September 5, the Onondaga County Legislature unanimously passed a resolution banning the solitary confinement of youth held in any facility in Onondaga County as a result of an arrest. This action comes after three years of advocacy from the Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse (ACTS), in partnership with other community groups.

The use of solitary confinement with youth held at the Justice Center had been largely curtailed by the settlement of a lawsuit filed last September. The resolution adopted last Tuesday by the County Legislature extends the ban to all county facilities.

The resolution was spearheaded by Legislator Chris Ryan who took up the issue after hearing about it at an ACTS event in October 2016. “This was something to get involved with, in order to put an end to a practice that shouldn’t be happening,” said Ryan.

ACTS worked closely with Ryan, as well as Legislators Linda Ervin and Monica Williams, to develop the resolution and advance it in the Legislature. Legislators Peggy Chase and John Dougherty were also sponsors.

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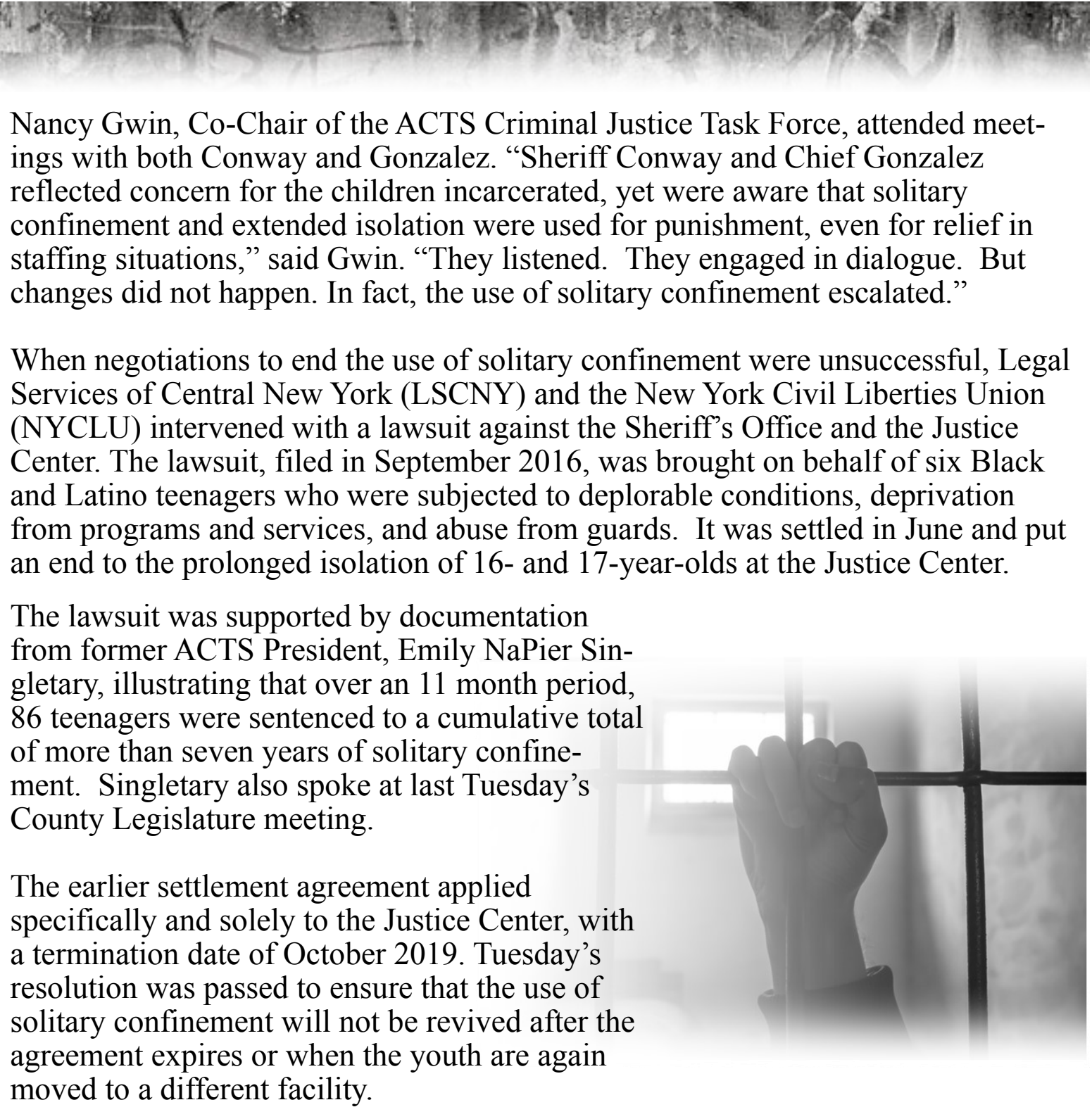
Several members of the community spoke at Tuesday's County Legislature meeting in support of the resolution. Michael Hungerford, a member of Grace Episcopal Church said, "Youth placed in solitary confinement are at high risk of suffering lifelong psychological damage. This practice is abhorrent."

In the fall of 2014, The Grace Project, a grassroots ministry of Grace Episcopal Church grounded in the concepts of restorative justice, forgiveness, and mutual accountability, alerted ACTS to the fact that 16- and 17-year-olds were routinely being placed in solitary confinement for weeks at a time for minor infractions at the Onondaga County Correctional Facility in Jamesville. Volunteers with The Grace Project had observed this trend while working with the youth at the jail.

In response to pressure from ACTS and The Grace Project, County Executive Joanie Mahoney announced at a rally at Grace Episcopal Church in the fall of 2015 that 16- and 17-year-olds would be moved from the Jamesville facility to the Onondaga County Justice Center in downtown Syracuse. This was touted by many as an end to the solitary confinement of youth, but the practice was merely relocated to a different jail. By transferring the youth, Mahoney also transferred responsibility for the issue to Sheriff Eugene Conway.

After the youth were moved, members of ACTS and The Grace Project began meeting with Sheriff Conway and jail administrators including Chief Esteban Gonzalez to express their concerns about the ongoing solitary confinement of 16- and 17-year-olds at the jail. They cited extensive research on the harmful impact of isolation on the adolescent brain. Numerous studies have shown that children and teenagers are especially vulnerable to psychological and emotional damage because their brains are not yet fully developed. Even relatively brief periods of isolation can lead to panic attacks, hypersensitivity to stimuli, difficulty with concentration and memory, self-mutilation, obsessive-compulsive behavior, and suicidal thoughts.

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Nancy Gwin, Co-Chair of the ACTS Criminal Justice Task Force, attended meetings with both Conway and Gonzalez. “Sheriff Conway and Chief Gonzalez reflected concern for the children incarcerated, yet were aware that solitary confinement and extended isolation were used for punishment, even for relief in staffing situations,” said Gwin. “They listened. They engaged in dialogue. But changes did not happen. In fact, the use of solitary confinement escalated.”

When negotiations to end the use of solitary confinement were unsuccessful, Legal Services of Central New York (LSCNY) and the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) intervened with a lawsuit against the Sheriff’s Office and the Justice Center. The lawsuit, filed in September 2016, was brought on behalf of six Black and Latino teenagers who were subjected to deplorable conditions, deprivation from programs and services, and abuse from guards. It was settled in June and put an end to the prolonged isolation of 16- and 17-year-olds at the Justice Center.

The lawsuit was supported by documentation from former ACTS President, Emily NaPier Singletary, illustrating that over an 11 month period, 86 teenagers were sentenced to a cumulative total of more than seven years of solitary confinement. Singletary also spoke at last Tuesday’s County Legislature meeting.

The earlier settlement agreement applied specifically and solely to the Justice Center, with a termination date of October 2019. Tuesday’s resolution was passed to ensure that the use of solitary confinement will not be revived after the agreement expires or when the youth are again moved to a different facility.

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For ACTS, the September 5 vote on the resolution is the culmination of three years of advocacy. “As a result of inaction from the very people who are supposed to represent them, children in Onondaga County suffered through abhorrent conditions for years,” said Luchele Chisunka, Co-Chair of the ACTS Criminal Justice Task Force. “Despite disappointment in the unnecessary length of the process, ACTS considers the passage of the resolution a victory for the children of Onondaga County and proof of the power of the people to influence their elected officials.”

About the Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse:

The Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse (ACTS) is a grassroots, interfaith network advocating for social justice. We are voices striving for a more just and fair community that improves the quality of life for all. For more, visit www.acts-syracuse.org, or contact Interim Co-Executive Craig French at 315-657-5869