Checklist for a Visit to a Juvenile Detention or Correctional Facility

This checklist is intended to help you understand what you’re seeing when you visit a juvenile justice facility. Certainly, juvenile detention officials have many important concerns, including safety and discipline. But when youth in custody are subjected to solitary confinement and other forms of isolation, the results can be devastating. Solitary confinement is traumatic and can cause serious psychological harm; the practice can also damage youth when it involves deprivations of treatment, education, programming and services necessary to facilitate healthy growth and development.

As you visit the facility, please consider not only the physical effects of the facility upon the youth but also the effects the facility may have upon his/her mental and emotional well-being, and his/her ability to grow and develop and relate to others in society.

Use the checklist below as an aid to help you observe and understand the impact life in confinement—and especially in solitary confinement and other forms of isolation—has on a child. After your visit to the facility, it may be useful to discuss your observations and opinions as a group.

Things to Observe:

- Is the facility clean? Is there trash on the floor, or are there towels or dirty clothing?
- What is the size of each person’s isolation cell/room? Is it roughly the same size as a regular bathroom, for instance? An elevator? A parking space?
  - Is there space for a desk? Is one provided?
  - Is there anywhere to sit other than the bed?
  - How large is the bed?
  - What kind of mattress is there?
  - How far is the toilet from the bed?
  - Is there a sink in the cell?
  - Does the youth have any privacy when using the toilet?
  - How much could someone actually move around in the cell?
  - Is there room for any exercise such as push-ups or calisthenics?
- Is there a window that allows light in from the outside? Does the window allow the youth to look outside? How big is the window? Is there any opportunity to see sky? Grass? Flowers? People?
- What kind of lighting is in the cell? Is it similar to office lighting? Normal kitchen lighting? A dim room? Twilight?
  - Could you read easily by this light?
  - Can the youth turn the light off to sleep?
- Is there a lack of color in cells and corridors? Are things written or smeared on the cell walls?
● What is the door to the room or cell like? Is there a window? Can the youth see other cells from the window? Is the door solid steel? Is there a food slot? Are there bars?
● Are isolation rooms/cells suicide-resistant and protrusion-free?
● Can air get into the cell through the door?
● What is the noise level in the unit like?
  ○ Is it eerily quiet or constantly noisy?
  ○ Is there a lot of noise from the other residents and officers? The doors and locks?
● What is the temperature like? Is it comfortable to wear street clothes? Sweater? T-shirt?
● What are the youths wearing in their cells?
● Do most of the youths appear to be sleeping in their cells? Pacing?
● Is there a call box or intercom in the cells so a youth can contact correctional officers in an emergency? If not, what happens in an emergency?
● What types of possessions do you see in each person’s room/cell?
● Are youths socializing with one another?
● Is it possible for youths to talk with one another? See one another?
● Are youths only able to speak with one another by shouting?
● What kind of recreation yard or other outdoor exercise facility is available?
  ○ How often can a youth go to the yard?
  ○ How long can s/he stay on the yard?
  ○ Can s/he associate with other youths on the yard or is s/he alone?
  ○ Is the yard out-of-doors?
  ○ How big is it?
  ○ Is there any exercise equipment available? Even a handball, basketball or pull-up bar?
  ○ What can the youth bring to the yard? Water? Book? Hat?
  ○ What happens when the weather is cold and it snows? Can the youth wear a coat or boots when s/he goes to the yard?
  ○ What can you see in the yard? Trees, grass, sky, parking lot?
  ○ Could a youth feel a breeze in the yard?

**Things to ask:**

● Do security officers and other staff receive any special training regarding the special needs of youth in isolation/solitary confinement?
● What possessions can the youth have in his/her cell?
  ○ Can s/he have pictures of friends and family?
  ○ Can s/he have a radio or TV?
  ○ How many books can s/he have at one time? How often is s/he allowed to get new books? Can s/he get books only from the facility’s library? From friends and family?
  ○ Can a youth have magazines or newspapers in his/her cell? How many? How often? Can s/he get magazines or newspapers only from the facility’s library or by subscription or from friends and family?
  ○ Can s/he have photographs? Drawings?
  ○ Can s/he have religious texts in his/her cell? Which texts are permitted or provided?
• Can s/he keep a copy of a loved one’s drawing in his/her cell?
• What, if any, reminders of home, family, friends, is s/he allowed to keep with him/her?

• How many hours a day can a youth spend in room confinement/isolation/solitary confinement? During the week? On weekends?
• Is the location, schedule or duration of recreation different for youth in isolation than for those in other housing setups?
• When do isolated youths receive meals? Do they eat together? Alone in their cells?
  • What type of food do they receive? Are nutrition requirements different for youth in isolation?
  • What happens if a youth needs a special diet for medical purposes? For religious purposes?
• Is a youth able to clean his/her cell? How often? With what materials?
• Are youths able to engage in social interaction with one another? Any other human beings?
• Are officers usually posted in the housing units or do they watch the housing units from a control center or guard tower?
• How often do officers check on youth in isolation? Every 15 minutes? Every hour? Is the check random or at consistent intervals? Is this check done through a closed door? Is it only a visual check or do staff speak with youth?
• Are there any types of structured activities that a youth can participate in while in isolation?
  • Drug treatment
  • Group therapy
  • Religious services
  • Other programming
• Do youths receive any educational programming while in isolation? Is educational programming different for those with disabilities?
  • What does the education program involve? Are students taught in a classroom or are worksheets/books simply brought to their cells? What type of student-teacher interaction is allowed? How many hours/minutes a day or week is education offered?
  • If there are different programs, what ages or characteristics distinguish eligibility for them?
  • Does the facility have a mechanism to evaluate youth to determine if they have a cognitive or learning disability or impairment? Does the facility receive the school/education records of youth? Does it receive Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or other legally-mandated plans for students with disabilities?
• If a youth leaves his/her cell for any reason, will s/he be strip-searched or restrained? When does strip-searching or restraint occur? What type of restraints are used?
• How often, while held in isolation, is the youth allowed to shower? For how long?
  • Is the youth kept in some form of restraints during the shower?
  • What kind of privacy does the youth have for showering?
  • Do youth shower with or near others?
• Do youths have access to clergy while they are in isolation?
  • How often?
  • What faiths?
Are youths allowed to attend congregant religious services?

- While held in isolation, what personal contact with other human beings does the youth have during the day?
  - Can s/he shake hands with someone?
  - Can s/he have visitors? Have contact visits?
  - Does anyone ever touch him/her?
- How often is the youth permitted to make a phone call while held in isolation? To whom (family, attorney, friends)? For how long? How much does a phone call cost?
- How many letters can the youth write while held in isolation? Receive? Per week? Per month? How much do stamps and writing materials cost?
- Are the youths in isolation allowed visits with friends and family? How often do these occur? What times/days are available for visits?
- If a youth receives a visit from his/her family, can s/he touch family members or children? Are the visits conducted in-person, behind glass, behind wire mesh, or by video?
- Are the practices related to correspondence and visits with family and loved ones different for youth while they are in isolation than in other housing arrangements?
- Is there any evaluation of a youth’s mental health before placement in isolation?
  - If so, what is it? Who does the evaluation?
  - Does the person who does the evaluation have any training in the effects of solitary confinement on youth development?
- Is there any on-going monitoring of a youth’s mental health in isolation?
  - If so, what is it? Who does the monitoring? How often?
  - Does the person who does the monitoring have any training in the effects of isolation on youth development?
- What provisions are made for suicide risk amongst youths in isolation?
  - How is suicide risk measured?
  - Do the provisions for addressing suicide risk distinguish between low and high/active risk of suicide?
- What happens if a youth needs psychiatric care?
  - Do youths have access to counseling?
  - Does a youth have to ask an officer if s/he needs a psychiatrist to visit him/her?
  - Where does the counseling occur? Is it in a private room or does it take place at cell front where others can hear?
  - What happens to a youth if s/he has a mental breakdown while in isolation? Will s/he be sent to a hospital? If s/he gets better, will s/he be returned to isolation?
- What happens if a youth needs medical care?
  - What happens in an emergency?
  - How can a youth access medical care?
  - Does a youth have to ask an officer if s/he needs medical care?
  - Are there designated areas and policies for medically isolating youth? If so, is the area for medical isolation of youth conducive to direct and continuous observation by staff? Are medically isolated youth observed at frequent intervals? How long?
- Does the facility have access to the medical or mental health records of youths? From prior detention facilities? From the community?
• What kinds of behaviors or violations result in transfer to isolation?
  o Are there clear guidelines for determining when isolation is warranted? Do those guidelines specify specific periods of time in isolation for specific violations?
  o Do staff receive training in conflict management, de-escalation techniques, and management of assaultive behavior, including when isolation may be used?
  o Does the facility administrator or his/her appointee review and investigate all uses of isolation?
• For what other reasons, besides disciplinary violations/punitive reasons, are youth sent to isolation?
  o Medical? Suicide watch?
  o Protection from others?
  o Administrative purposes?
  o Short cool-down periods?
• Who has to sign off on a decision to put youth in isolation?
• What, if any, administrative review and analysis is undertaken of reports and records relating to placement of youth in isolation?
• Does the facility keep logs of periodic checks of youth in isolation by staff?
  o Where are the logs kept (taped to the door of the room; at the staff station; in the unit log, etc.)?
  o Do they have the exact time of each check?
  o Do they appear to have been written at different times (e.g., different ink or handwriting)?
  o Are the records for current youth filled out before the actual time?
• In cases of disciplinary/punitive isolation/room confinement, do reports contain enough information to provide a reasonable understanding of the entire incident that led to the isolation? Does the report contain enough information to assess whether staff took proper interventions before using isolation?
• Are the mental health needs of youth or opinions of mental health staff considered?
• Are younger children put in isolation by default to separate them from older adolescents?
• Are youth punished with isolation? If so, are there any special provisions made to accommodate the youth’s age, immaturity and developmental needs?
• How long do youth usually spend in isolation? What is the average? Median? What explains the outliers?
• Is there a limit to how long a youth can be held in isolation?
• If a youth breaks the rules while in isolation, what kinds of disciplinary procedures are used? Are there any special provisions made to accommodate the youth’s age, immaturity and developmental needs in those procedures?