

American Institute of Architects New York Int. 549-2022 Solitary Confinement Ban Testimony

Thank you to the City Council for holding this hearing today. My name is Andrea Lamberti and I represent the American Institute of Architects New York, also known as AIA New York, as 2022 board president. AIA New York represents New York City's architects employed in government agencies, professional service firms, and academia.

The American Institute of Architects

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Some of our members are employed in the design of criminal justice facilities, including jails, in New York City and other areas. Many of our members have spoken out against the design of spaces for incarceration. Others, when called to design such spaces, have advocated for revising traditional designs to consider the mental health of occupants.

For years, AIA has taken strong positions, both locally and nationally, against the design and construction of spaces for solitary confinement. AIA New York strongly supports Intro 549's prohibition of solitary confinement in city jails.

Solitary confinement is not an effective strategy for the reduction of violence in detention facilities. Spaces for solitary confinement are designed to be punitive to detainees. Those we have seen in New York City are usually windowless boxes or cages, crafted to be oppressive environments that are intended to harm occupants' psychological wellbeing.

This is particularly troubling considering that a majority of the detainees in New York City suffer from mental illness. It is both cruel and poor policy to further strain the mental health of those who are already mentally ill. In fact, forcing mentally ill detainees into solitary confinement further aggravates their wellbeing, making them even more likely to resort to violence and putting guards and their fellow detainees in greater danger.

Nevertheless, we recognize that detainees should have an option to spend time alone. For both safety and comfort, it is important that detainees have their own individual living quarters. The city's justice facility design standards in Local Law 194-2019 mandate "individual occupancy housing units" for detainees. If new jails legally require individual living quarters, there is no need for solitary confinement as a safety measure at all.

The consensus of architects is that the design and construction of spaces for solitary confinement is a bad policy. We need laws in New York City that reflects the best architectural practices, and we endorse the possibility that our city can serve as the bellwether for the country on this issue. Therefore, we ask the City Council to pass Intro 549 to make our city safer and more humane. Thank you.