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Washington prison mimicking Oregon program showing nature videos to solitary prisoners



An inmate at the Washington Corrections Center watches a video of an underwater reef scene while seated in the facility's "Blue Room," which is part of a new program that may soon be extended to dozens of maximum custody solitary confinement prisoners at the facility. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren) [The Associated Press](#)

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By [The Associated Press](#)

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SHELTON, Wash. — For dozens of maximum custody prisoners at Washington Corrections Center, 23 hours each day is spent alone in a small cell, with an hour to walk or run, also alone, in a recreation room with high concrete walls and a metal-grated roof that offers a view of the sky.

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In the coming weeks, these prisoners — which include the most dangerous and unruly of the overall prison population — will have the option of using the hour outside of their cells to watch sunsets, mountains and underwater seascapes through a program that brings the outdoors inside, via video, projected on a blank recreation room wall.

The hope of corrections officials is that by offering a regular visual dose of nature, inmates will be calmer, guards will deal with fewer outbursts or violent interactions, and overall safety in the unit will increase.

The so-called "Blue Room" is based on a [program of the same name in an Oregon prison](#) that has seen some early success with prisoners in its solitary confinement wing.

Officials at Washington Corrections Center have installed a projector in one of the recreation rooms and are working out the final details before making it available to inmates in their intensive management unit.

Starting a few weeks ago, in a room painted blue and decorated with plants, prison officials started showing the videos to prisoners with intellectual disabilities who are part of a special unit at the prison.

The prison, about 30 miles northwest of Olympia, is the first in the state to set up the videos, though others have expressed interest, including Washington State Penitentiary at Walla Walla.

"If there's something that shows promise and is going to make it a better work environment for our staff and for offenders, that's something we need to take seriously," said Steve Sinclair, the state Department of Corrections' assistant secretary over prisons.

The blue room is the latest endeavor from the state Department of Corrections' partnership with the Sustainability in Prisons Project at Evergreen State College in Olympia. Through that effort, prisoners at various facilities have been involved in programs to breed endangered frogs and threatened butterflies and to grow native flowers and prairie grasses.

Last year, Washington corrections officials met with their counterparts at Snake River Correctional Institute in Ontario, Oregon, which has been using its room since April 2013. The program was named one of [Time magazine's "25 Best Inventions of 2014."](#)

"When we started using the blue room what we noticed, right off, is that there was a lot less chaos in the units," said Renee Smith, Snake River's behavioral health services manager.

There have been fewer situations where guards have had to forcibly extract inmates from their cells because of misconduct, and fewer overall crises with inmates struggling with anxiety or depression, she said. Correctional officers have the discretion to let inmates use the room at other times, including if they're having an anxiety attack or some other type of issue.

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Smith said the prison has received calls from corrections officials around the country about the room, and a few from overseas.

The idea for the Oregon program was sparked by Nalini Nadkarni, a professor at the University of Utah. She was called by officials at Snake River who saw a 2010 taped TED talk she gave. In that 5-minute talk, given while she was a professor at the Evergreen State College, Nadkarni spoke of the impact nature could have on those who have no access to it: specifically, prisoners held in solitary confinement.

Nadkarni, who had previously worked with prison officials in the Sustainability in Prisons Project, proposed putting nature pictures on the walls of the indoor recreation yard in maximum custody units.

Snake River officials were intrigued and wanted to take it one step farther and use videos. Nadkarni and other researchers visited the prison earlier this year to interview inmates and guards and to look at disciplinary data. Nalini said that their preliminary analysis shows that the unit that has seen the nature imagery appears to have a lower rate of disciplinary issues with inmates than the units that haven't seen the videos.

Josue Torres-Rubio, a 22-year-old from Wapato who is serving time on charges for robbery, residential burglary and possession of a stolen car, said he's looking forward to the video option during his time away from his solitary cell.

"It would be good to watch something other than the walls," he said.

Currently, statewide, there are 837 prisoners — or 5 percent of the overall prison population — being held in a single cell. Those prisoners range from those who have committed an infraction in the general population and spend no more than 30 days in solitary, to prisoners who are a threat to staff or others, and can spend more than three years in segregated housing. Others are there for their own protection.

Nadkarni said programs like the blue room are essential rehabilitation tools for prisoners, many of whom will ultimately be released.

"Whatever we can do to men and women while incarcerated to make them more human, less violent, less anxious, it seems that benefits society as a whole," she said.

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