

# MOSES



Madison Organizing in Strength, Equality, and Solidarity  
**for Criminal Justice Reform**

## In this issue:

Talib Akbar & Solitary Confinement  
Organizer's Corner  
Upcoming Events  
New Hope for Old Law Prisoners  
Suprise Luncheon Speaker  
Transformation Celebration  
MOSES Supports Youth  
Book Review

## Talib Akbar: Tireless Campaigner Against Solitary Confinement

by Barbie Jackson, MOSES Secretary

**W**ISDOM and MOSES have raised up solitary confinement in Wisconsin's prisons and jails as an issue from the outset, through various initiatives, written materials and other actions determined by WISDOM's Solitary Confinement Task Force meeting via monthly conference calls. But one individual, through his dedication and persistence, stands apart as a hero in his efforts to change solitary confinement practices in Wisconsin. That individual is MOSES and EXPO member Talib Akbar.

### The Play

Akbar, whose play "Like an Animal in a Cage" exposes the inhumanity of solitary confinement practices, reminds us that the United Nations has declared solitary confinement for longer than 15 days to be torture. Yet Wisconsin has confined people for many months, and even years, at times and it continues to do so.

The idea of the play came to Akbar a couple of years ago. He spoke with WISDOM state director David Liners about his desire to use theater to bring alive the experience of solitary confinement. Initially, Liners put Akbar in touch with Tonen O'Connor, an 86-year-old man and former actor, who had known another man who had committed suicide after being held in solitary confinement. This experience became a strong motivation for her to advocate



for change.

Akbar talked about his idea for the play with O'Connor who agreed to co-produce it. They created the events of the play and ultimately the script from actual incident reports documenting the basis for punishing individuals for their actions, as well as from O'Connor's knowledge about the man who had committed suicide.

The play has been performed five times in 2018, including once in Milwaukee, twice in Madison – at the First Congregational Church and the Central Library – once in Waukesha, and most recently at Beloit College. The next performance will be held in Appleton in January, 2019.

The play includes scenes of what happens when a person is taken out of their cell, e.g., to see the nurse or to review their record. One

*continued on page 3*

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# Organizer’s Corner

## It’s a New (Post-Election) Day

Life is continually transforming itself into different shapes and meanings. We can resist, but whether we go kicking and screaming, or peaceful and contemplative, every day life will change. The secret to embracing change is one’s perception of the outcome and one’s ability to navigate the waves.

At our Transformation Celebration Fundraising Gala on December 15th (see page 6 for details), we will be honoring three people who have gone through the trials and tribulations of incarceration in jails and prisons and have successfully changed their lives for the better.

In January we will experience another change throughout the state: the swearing in of a new governor, lieutenant governor, and a slew of other elected and appointed officials

whose actions will transform all of us in some way. These people will bring with them their own ideas about how our community can be improved, updated, fixed, or saved. Their decisions will have short-term and long-term effects. This change is a reality and MOSES understands how vital it is to have a seat and voice at the table for justice reform and social change. We intend to be there. ■



Frank Davis  
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# Meetings

## WISDOM conference calls (605) 468-8012

- Old Law: December 8 and January 12 at 8:30 am (code 423950)
- Solitary Confinement: December 11 and January 8 at 4:00 pm (code 423950)
- Prison Prevention: December 11 and January 8 at 5:00 pm (code 423950)
- Post-Release: December 20 and January 17 at 7:30 pm (code 423951)

## MOSES Religious Leaders Caucus (RLC)

- RLC Monthly Meeting: December 12 and January 9 14 from 8:30-10:00 am  
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church (Jericho Room)

## MOSES Task Force: Justice System Reform (MJSR)

- MJSR Monthly Meeting: December 11 and January 8  
6:30-8:30 at Madison Police Station South District, 825 Hughes Place

## Next MOSES monthly meeting

Sunday, January 6, 3:30-5:30 pm  
Sunday, February 3, 3:30-5:30 pm  
Check the MOSES website calendar for meeting locations.  
Click on the calendar link for details and directions.

Joining one or more of the WISDOM conference calls is easy and can be very informative.

At the appointed date and time:

- Call (605) 468-8012
- Enter the code after the beep
- State your name and that you are from MOSES after the greeting
- Listen, learn, and contribute as you wish

Old Law Parole: code 423950#

Solitary Confinement: code 423950#

Prison Prevention: code 423950#

Post-Release: code 423951#

# Talib Akbar Campaigns Against Solitary Confinement

continued from page 1

such scene, depicting Akbar’s own experience, shows him being taken out of his cell only to return and find his cell wrecked and his personal pictures torn off the wall.

By exposing the truth in this way, through enactments and personal testimonies of what people have experienced as victims of the system and its abusive practices, the stories have power to affect the viewer deeply, says Akbar. The actors include three formerly incarcerated people who perform the roles of inmates, others who play officers and prison staff, a narrator, a host, and Melissa Luden, a formerly incarcerated person who gives a personal testimony. In addition to Akbar, some of the dedicated actors and participants include: Melissa Luden, Carl Fields, Eugen Crisler, Deborah Adkins, Paul Sullivan, Barbra Landes, Daniel Wright, Tonen O’Connor, Jerry Hancock, and Kimberly Williams.

In early November, Beloit College honored Akbar with scheduling a two-day event which included a performance of the play at the Beloit College Theater, two six-hour showings of the solitary confinement truck he created (see photo below), full accommodations for Akbar to stay in their guest house, and \$300 per day. These funds allowed Akbar to support other performers for overnight stays and to make donations to MOSES, EXPO, and First Congregational Church for their support of his efforts.

Akbar plans to start adding new stories, such as those told to Peggy Swan, founder of Forum for Understanding Prisoners. Swan, who has been involved with prisoners for years, is like a mother to many inmates who tell her all their stories.

## The Truck

In addition to developing a play to inform citizens about people’s experiences in solitary confinement, Akbar has converted a truck to demonstrate conditions inside a cell.

A prior MOSES newsletter article related how Akbar and Edgewood College created a full-scale model cell based on a sketch he had made while in solitary confinement in a Wisconsin prison. Akbar transported that cell over a three-year period to several locations, but because of the challenge of transporting a 1000-pound cell, he got the idea of converting a 19-foot truck he had previously used for his moving business into a fully portable cell.

Akbar went to work on his project in 2017. While he funded most of the work himself, he is thankful to the MOSES people who helped pay for large-scale posters he had made to display information on the side of the truck.

Since its completion in the fall of 2018, the truck has been shown in several locations and is available for MOSES congregations and others to demonstrate the terrible conditions of solitary confinement. Experiencing the confinement within the truck cell is sobering, particularly when the austere conditions are accompanied by the sounds of banging and yelling, which were recorded from actual conditions. Akbar describes the sounds as “just horrific.” He says the sounds only stop for about ten minutes at mealtimes.

The truck was first shown at First United Methodist Church in September and has also been shown by WISDOM affiliate SOPHIA in Waukesha, where his play was performed, and at Carroll University, where Akbar gave a presentation. He also went to Riverside Radio Station in Milwaukee to demonstrate the truck, and while there was interviewed on the radio as people came by for an experience of the truck and the conditions it demonstrates. His next stop will be Madison Friends Meetinghouse in mid-December.

Before he could travel outside Madison, Akbar needed to take the truck to the shop to make sure it was sound for traveling. Since then he has put 500 miles on it. It is expensive for him to operate and maintain the truck – for example, it costs about \$40 to get to Milwaukee and back – so donations are very welcome.

Akbar hopes MOSES members will approach him with ideas about where to show the truck, to help him continue to promote the need for changes in solitary confinement practices in Wisconsin. People can contact Akbar at switcho453@gmail.com. ■



Above: Mobile solitary confinement cell and Talib Akbar



## New Hope for Old Law Prisoners

by Alison Mix, MOSES Vice-President

Between the release of Baron Walker, featured in the documentary film *Milwaukee 53206* in August and the election of Tony Evers as Governor in November, members of WISDOM's Old Law Parole and Compassionate Release work group have much to celebrate.

Like the other three WISDOM work groups, the Old Law group meets via monthly conference calls. Sister Frances Hoffman and this writer are the MOSES members usually on the call, though we differ from many members who actually have loved ones incarcerated under the Old Law, i.e., before Wisconsin's truth-in-sentencing law came into effect on January 1st, 2000. Before that date, when judges sentenced people to prison, they understood that they would be eligible for parole after 25 percent of that time. In those days, most people who applied for parole gained their release within the first few years they were eligible. Last year, the percentage of eligible people released on parole was barely 10 percent, meaning that the vast majority of those who are called "old law" prisoners, numbering about 3,000, are serving much more time than the judges who originally sentenced them anticipated.

### Baron Walker's family rejoices

This was the case for Baron Walker, whose wife Beverly has long participated in the Old Law conference calls. Sentenced to 60 years in 1996 for participating in a pair of bank robberies, Walker became eligible for parole in 2011. Yet he was denied parole six times and remained in prison, despite having seized every possible opportunity for treatment and education while incarcerated.

Then, on August 16<sup>th</sup>, a Milwaukee County circuit judge modified Walker's sentence, allowing him to go home the next day. Modifying a sentence requires an inmate to show a new factor exists that was not known or considered at his sentencing. For Baron Walker, and hundreds like him, defense attorney Craig Mastantuono argued that that factor is Wisconsin's sharp change in parole policy since Gov. Scott Walker was elected.

During the September conference call, Beverly described for us the events that led up to Baron's release. It had all started two and a half years earlier, following a showing of the documentary *Milwaukee 53206*, when Beverly was approached by a gentleman saying he had attorney friends who might help her. Craig Mastantuono, a respected Milwaukee trial attorney, then proceeded to work on Baron's case on a *pro bono* basis. On the same call, Baron greeted our members and thanked us, and we offered him our congratulations!

It remains to be seen whether the argument used in Baron Walker's case will work for other Old Law prisoners. He will be explaining how he did it at a meeting on November 26<sup>th</sup> in Milwaukee, after which more will be understood. However, the election of Tony Evers as Governor may in any case change the landscape considerably.



Baron Walker and family

### Evers must be held to his commitment on Old Law policy

When asked by WISDOM ahead of the June gubernatorial candidate forum in Pewaukee if he would immediately call for a complete, independent review of every case of a person eligible for parole, with the goal of releasing all those who can be released safely, Evers responded: "Yes. As Governor, I would want a complete evaluation of those policies and the individuals impacted by them."

Those on the November conference call speculated about what steps should be taken to ensure that momentum on the issue is maintained as the new administration takes office in January. One of our members, Joyce Ellwanger, suggested that we make a list of those old law people we know who should be eligible for release under the "safe to return to community" eligibility Tony Evers has promised to recognize. She noted that Evers will be appointing the new head of the DOC as well as a new Parole Commissioner. We need to decide if we should advocate for a return to the old Parole Commission with its eight members. (Walker reduced it to four.) Should the Commission be accountable to an independent public review board? What about transparency? Can we ask that inmates be allowed to have family members or support persons present at their hearings? Ellwanger also

asked us to think about violent offenders or sex offenders who have served 20 or more years? What about people who have life sentences because of unfair long sentences being served consecutively? All these and more are questions our work group will be pondering in the coming months as we hope for positive change and for more releases like Baron Walker's, with all the joy they bring. ■



## Surprise Speaker Touches Hearts at October Fundraising Luncheon

by Alison Mix, MOSES Vice President

On Tuesday, October 16<sup>th</sup>, some 60 people gathered at Bethel Lutheran Church for our fundraising luncheon, expecting to hear presentations from Melissa Ludin, President of EXPO (Ex-incarcerated People Organizing) and Sarah Ferber, Associate Director of EXPO, on the plight of incarcerated women. In an uncanny coincidence, both prospective speakers were prevented from coming to Madison due to car troubles that morning. Luckily, our Organizer, Frank Davis, was able to recruit another speaker, Veronica Alfred, at the last minute.

Without advance preparation, Veronica's account of her own battles with drug addiction, incarceration and recovery was all the more moving. Her experience in the Dane County Jail of being put in solitary confinement for declining during the intake process to answer highly personal medical questions in a quasi-public setting prompted one of MOSES's recommendations to the Dane County Board. We were also able to see some slides describing the increasing number of women in prison, the racial disparities, and the gender specific issues they face. ■





# Transformation Celebration

MOSES Fundraising Gala  
December 15, 2018  
6:30 p.m.



image by James Morgan

## Program

Gathering and food

### Welcome

Emcee: Myra McNair, Anesis Therapy

### Honorees

- Carmella Glenn, *Just Bakery*
- Eugene Smalls, *Madison Pentecostal Assembly*
- James Morgan, *Madison-area Urban Ministries*

### Dancing & Music

featuring Tani and the Afrofunkstars:  
Music from Mali that will move you!

### Location:

#### Brassworks

214 Waubesa Street • Madison 53704

Tickets: \$65

Register at <http://mosesmadison.org/gala/>

## Gala Sponsors

### Gold

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Dick Goldberg

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### Friends of MOSES

Anonymous Donor  
Steve Goldberg

## MOSES Members Attend Sometimes Contentious Neighborhood Meetings to Support Youth Justice

by Barbie Jackson, MOSES Secretary

MOSES members attended two community meetings on Madison's far west side last month following several controversial statements made about juvenile crime, as reported in an October issue of the *Wisconsin State Journal*. At the first of these meetings on October 24th, four of our members attended and heard: members of the Madison Police Department reporting on recent crime statistics, including repeated car thefts by a few teenagers; a judge speaking about the challenge of limited options for handling these children; and many residents in an audience of about 150 calling out for the punishment of these youths with no apparent understanding of the value of humane, restorative practices for addressing crime and reducing recidivism.

Concerned about the conduct and tone of the meeting, we rallied behind the scenes in support of a more balanced presentation at the second meeting on November 5th. About 15 MOSES members with prepared statements and questions attended that gathering. Fortunately, perhaps in part because of MOSES' efforts, the second meeting gave a more balanced account of the issues. Also, the audience, which had swelled to about 500, was more diverse in its makeup and more balanced in its questions and commentary, which included statements by three MOSES members.

The issues raised at these meetings persist, and MOSES will continue to seek opportunities to participate in the

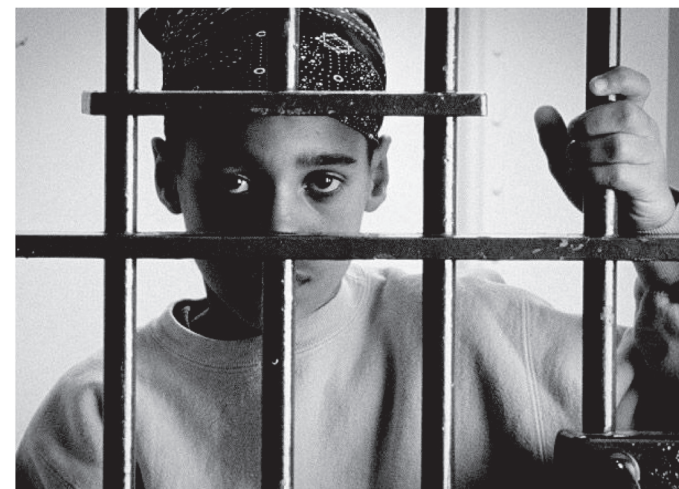
promotion of good practices for working with young people involved in the criminal justice system. In particular, the Diversions Focus Group will continue to support effective diversion practices wherever possible. It will also monitor potential consideration of the specific concerns raised at these recent meetings by attending the Dane County Criminal Justice Council meetings and by seeking to influence those involved in working toward solutions. Watch for updates as we learn how those interested might become more involved. ■

### Imagine

imagine havin' ya dreams shattered  
b4 ya drift to sleep  
&  
poison poured in ya gray matter  
causing ya 3rd eye to weep  
with ya heart knee-deep in sorrow  
&  
the tides are rapidly rising  
ya try'na float N2 2morrow  
while feelin' ya boat capsizing  
visualizing ya self planting seeds in acid rain  
hopin rose petals spring 4th 2 decorate ya pain  
as faith strains to push through the steel of ya soul  
thoughts frapped by the chill of the cold  
watchin' each day erode  
'til daybreak dawns 2 mock ya existence  
despite all that shit U tackle the new horizon  
as the windstorm roadblocks ya resistance  
...imagine it

from *Buried Alive: poetry born of a life sentence*  
a new volume of prison poetry by Rudy Bankston.

Available at: [www.iamwe classics.com](http://www.iamwe classics.com)



# Book Review–The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America

reviewed by Pamela Gates, MOSES Communications Team

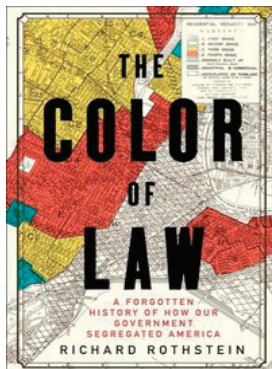
by Richard Rothstein

We are all aware of the plenitude of segregation in this country, especially in housing, but do we know how it came to be? This deeply researched book gives a graphic picture of how we in the U.S. came up with yet another way to extend the basic racism that had established itself in the slavery era.

The Federal Housing Authority (FHA) “often ... demanded that developers who received the construction loans it sponsored include racially restrictive covenants in their subdivisions’ property deeds”. When the VA began to guarantee mortgages after WWII, it also “frequently demanded that properties with VA mortgages have racial covenants in their deeds”. African Americans were welcome to help build GI housing after the war, for example Levittown on Long Island, NY, but they couldn’t get loans to live there. The same thing was happening in California, right here in Madison, and all across the country.

Rothstein cites “slum clearance” as a way to “shift African American populations away from downtown business districts, so that white commuters, shoppers, and business elites would not be exposed to black people”. Clearing away slums could have been a good idea, he says, if decent homes in integrated neighborhoods had been provided, but instead it just “reinforced the spatial segregation of African Americans, as well as their impoverishment,” at least in part due to further distancing them from access to employment. Rothstein declares that one of state and local governments’ slum clearance tools was the federal interstate highway system; routes were in many cases designed to “destroy urban African American communities”.

Equity in our homes is the main source of wealth for middle-income Americans. Median white household wealth in 2017 was about \$134,000; the same figure for blacks was about \$11,000. A good portion of the blame for this enormous discrepancy can be laid on the government’s racial housing policies of the past and their strong lingering ef-



fects on the present.

This meticulously researched book is dense with information about how government agencies went about maintaining racial segregation in housing and thus deliberately forcing blacks into less desirable housing conditions. The synopsis on the back cover says it well: “federal, state, and local governments systematically imposed residential segregation, with undisguised racial zoning, public housing that purposefully severed previously mixed commu-

nities, subsidies for builders to create white-only suburbs, tax exemptions for prejudiced institutions, and support for violent resistance to African Americans in white neighborhoods.” Rothstein demonstrates how police and prosecutors brutally upheld these standards, and how such policies still influence tragedies in places like Ferguson and Baltimore” and, I add, Madison.

Remedies are offered in the last chapter, “Considering Fixes.” One suggestion is extending Section 8 housing subsidies for low-income families to everyone who needs it. This will be costly, he acknowledges, but the government doesn’t limit the housing subsidy it gives middle-income (mostly white) homeowners: tax deductions for both property taxes and mortgage interest. Desegregation will involve costs, some of them substantial, he acknowledges: “We’ve made a constitutional mess that will not be easily undone.”

“This is not a book about whites as actors and blacks as victims,” Rothstein says in his preface, which works just as well as a conclusion to this review: “As citizens in this democracy, all of us – white, black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and others – bear a collective responsibility to enforce our Constitution and to rectify past violations whose effects endure.” He shows us how these violations arose and how we’re paying the price for them right now in our painfully divided society, and inspires each of us to do what we can to correct the imbalances. I highly recommend *The Color of Law* for readability and wealth of information. ■

MOSES thanks...

