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Linking faith communities across Wisconsin to work for Justice

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Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility (MSDF) briefing

The inhumane conditions at Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility (MSDF) and the policies and practices that force people to be incarcerated there are out of step with Wisconsin's values of fairness, compassion, and equity.

Approved in the state budget, and built in 2001 to accommodate Wisconsin's racist, aggressive community supervision system, MSDF holds people accused of crimeless rule violations in excruciating conditions. The State of Wisconsin built MSDF to incarcerate people who have allegedly violated rules of probation, parole, or extended supervision. Originally, the facility was to hold people for no more than 21 days; today, people spend months or even years there.

People imprisoned in MSDF never see outside (there are no windows), never get to go outdoors, never get to have a "contact visit" with a loved one. With no air conditioning, temperatures often rise to over 100 degrees in the summer, in an overcrowded facility where many people sleep on the floor.

MSDF is an inhumane facility. In addition, it meets no public safety need. The vast majority of people held there have not been convicted of a new crime, and are not even charged with a new crime. Most are on "holds" as Community Corrections investigates whether or not they have broken a rule of Supervision. A smaller number of people in MSDF are in "alternatives to incarceration" – spending months in programs for addiction or cognitive issues. This group could be much better served in community-based programs, living in safe, healthy environments.

Actions to be taken:

1. Direct the DOC to eliminate incarceration as a response to suspected or proven technical violations of supervision rules;
2. Move all of the "alternative to incarceration" programs from MSDF to community-based settings;
3. Build into the 2019-21 state budget a mandate to close MSDF by December 31, 2019 and to include plans to re-invest savings from MSDF closure to community-based organizations like Project Return that work to connect people returning home from prison with jobs, housing, peer support and treatment.

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