

# **Prison Closure Divides Abolitionist Community in Washington State**

**Activists are conflicted about whether the move is a win for incarcerated people and allies — or for the carceral state.**

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As abolitionists, we should let the carceral state fight for what is its own. Our energy could be better spent helping the state fail than helping it succeed. We should be focused on building systems of social support to replace it rather than keeping it from collapsing under the weight of its own bloated grotesqueness. When the carceral state is in crisis, it will seek remedies to further its own existence. As abolitionists, we should never align with those interests. Even when they look like wins for our movement, they are not.

I board the transport in an orange jumpsuit, shackled and cuffed at the waist, one of many prisoners in exodus from the Washington State Reformatory.

The rattling of our chains fills the cabin as we find places to sit. I slide into a seat with a small window high on the wall next to me—the coveted seat with a “view.” Nervous chatter ensues as we wait to be shipped to the next prison.

In 2021, during the pandemic, the Washington Department of Corrections (WDOC), experienced a steep decrease in prison admissions (and therefore a great loss of revenue). In response, the department announced it would close the Washington State Reformatory (WSR), the oldest unit in the Monroe Correctional Complex in Monroe, Washington. This caused a rift among incarcerated abolitionists: some saw it as a win for the movement, while others felt it was a win for the prison industrial complex.

Two years after WSR closed, the latter group feels vindicated as it appears the state created an illusion of decarceration. The lessons that can be learned from these events will prove invaluable to future generations fighting for change. Otherwise, we may be left celebrating battles while we are all losing the war.

By the time the bus gets moving, the still air and hot breath of prisoners have fogged the windows. I stand and strain against my shackles, searching for a clear corner of glass from which to catch a peek. In my effort, the leg irons bite into my ankles: a price I willingly pay to see the world.

As we roll away from the walls and grounds of that prison, I am filled with a sense of loss. Not for that 6×9 foot cell — a cell so small I am forced to sidesaddle the toilet to take a dump — but loss for what has just been taken from me.

The prison may have closed, but for me, shackled in the back of the transport, removed from my support networks, advocacy community, platform, and education, this did not feel like abolition. As I've learned, we sometimes hold different definitions of the word. But I know my chances for freedom diminish with every mile we put between us and the walls of that prison.

## **TEAR IT ALL DOWN**

Yesterday, a prisoner jokingly asked a guard walking by “What do you think about abolition?”

The guard facetiously answered, “Sure. Tear it all down.” Then walked off shaking his head in laughter.

This trope is unfortunately prevalent in the minds of many. How telling and shocking would it have been if he instead replied, “Sure. Go ahead and build something new.” If that was his answer, even in jest, our movement would be in a better place.

The tragedy is that some members of our movement are so narrowly focused on the idea that abolition is defined by tearing things down that the impulse to dismantle can reign without regard for a longer vision of transformation. Or, as was the case at WSR, the impulse to dismantle can even compromise existing abolitionist infrastructure.

When a plan to shut down a prison or precinct or to release prisoners under reform schemes is presented, it is easy to jump at the opportunity for what appears to be a win. Wins are, after all, very hard to come by.

In the end, some prisoners will go home, but no meaningful change will occur. WDOC will conservatively repossess 30 percent of those who were released within three years. No significant human capital will be lost, and the system will continue on, uninterrupted. The prisoners who do go home will do so at the cost of WDOC having a tighter grasp on the rest the carceral state will continue on with the status quo. This is not decarceration.

## **HELPING THE STATE FAIL**

Mariame Kaba tells us, “Community matters. Collectivity matters. To me, that’s the whole thing. And if we can’t get along with each other, and we can’t take responsibility for what we do with each other, then what the hell are we doing?”

The voices that spoke for the closure of WSR caused harm and assisted the carceral state in its objective to both save money and disempower abolition structures that took decades for prisoners to build at WSR. These voices carried water for the man. The voices of those who will speak for the proposed “third off” bill in Washington’s 2024 legislative session will also be carrying water for The Man. This will be done by putting energy into helping WDOC pass a bill that benefits the carceral state in the long term.

As we struggle to create abolition, it is vital for us to learn from each other, to have accountability, and to maintain—and sometimes reestablish—solidarity along the way. We are all going to get it wrong sometimes. But when we do, we have to be able to analyze that, explore how it impacted our efforts, and apply those lessons to the future. We desperately need to get on the same page, or people with power will continue to divide and distract us from achieving the transformation we so desire.

The predicted influx is, for various fiscal and logistical concerns, more than the state can manage. There is not currently enough money in the budget nor staff available to run prisons at their former capacity, let alone at a greater one. In fact, none of the staffing concerns that allegedly drove the closure of WSR were addressed, and prisons across the state now regularly shut down recreation, education, and religious programs because of a lack of staff.

In response to this, as a blatant attempt to open up bed space for new prisoners, WDOC tried to slide a reiteration of a 2021 bill to increase good time (time taken off of prisoners' sentences) by a third. But, they introduced the bill late in the 2023 session. This caused the bill to be delayed and postponed any hearing of the bill until the 2024 legislative session.

In 2024, when this reform is heard, the voices of prisoners who stand to benefit will rise to the top of the discussion. They will create and insist on the narrative that this reform is decarceration. Those prisoners will muster what influence they can through privilege, family, and community in order to help WDOC pass their own legislation.

But the legislation itself will be problematic. Early versions of the bill contain language that cuts people out from the proposed relief by excluding those with mandatory minimum sentences. This exclusion will disparately impact communities of color as disproportionate numbers of BIPOC men and women are sentenced under the mandatory minimum schemes this legislation seeks to exclude.

The result of this proposed "decarceration" plan will be to force local organizers and organizations like Look2Justice to exert massive amounts of energy in the next legislative session to make this legislation less harmful to the community. The energy spent attempting to mitigate the harm of this proposed reform will detract from work towards transformation.

Who can blame good-hearted people who wish to seize apparent opportunities for decarceration? But the reality can be more complicated. This can make us vulnerable to exploitation. Our impulse to jump at apparent victories should be tempered with caution and foresight when the win is offered too willingly by our oppressors.

When, in the summer of 2021, WDOC announced it would close WSR, abolitionists began to choose sides, both for and against the closure.

The voice of prisoners in favor of the closure was led by a prisoner named Felix Sitthivong, who published an article in Inquest titled "Divide and Conquer." In the article, Sitthivong excoriated abolitionist prisoners who did not view the closure as abolition and argued that the material conditions of confinement at WSR justified the closure. Sitthivong stated he stood on the ideal that "prison closures really mean prison closures."

The other side of the argument was led, in part, by another prisoner named Tomas Keen, who published an article in the same publication titled "A Warm Closure." In this article, Keen exposed WDOC for couching the closure of WSR as decarceration while, in reality, this maneuver would instead increase the carceral footprint and harm communities of color. Keen argued that "WSR is, quite literally, the paradigm for restorative, community-focused facilities."

But the lens of history has helped settle this debate. The social and political landscape that emerged in Washington prisons since WSR's closure shines a bright light on the harm caused to abolitionist formations and reveals sinister designs by WDOC to eradicate programs, organizations, and communities working towards liberation. In order to understand why some abolitionist prisoners fought to keep a prison open, one would have to know why WSR was important to the movement.

Built in 1910, WSR was one of the oldest prisons in the state. The walls surrounding the prison endured cycles of crumbling and repair, leaving a mosaic of partially whitewashed brick as a testament to the century of its

carceral presence. It leaked, had sewage problems, and its concrete floors sagged, but WSR was a power center for prisoner-led abolition groups and liberation efforts in Washington state. No greater collective of prisoners fighting for change and freedom could be found anywhere else in Washington.

Prisoners confined to WSR benefited from their proximity to the Seattle metropolitan area and the long history of community involvement found there. WSR held onto remnants of a culture predating the era of mass incarceration, and organizations there, like The Black Prisoners Caucus (BPC) and Concerned Lifer's Organization (CLO)—both born in 1972—were older than some of the bricks in the walls.

These prisoner-led organizations had taken to heart a 2014 article by Michelle Alexander, *How To Dismantle the New Jim Crow*, and were deploying the three actionable steps she listed for change. Prisoners at WSR were actively engaged in (1) Awakening, (2) Building an Underground Railroad, and (3) Working for Abolition.

The CLO and BPC were providing great and loyal service towards Awakening. Every Monday and Friday night, the CLO and BPC hosted members of the community, volunteers, and lawmakers to engage in robust discussions on the harms of the carceral state. Both groups held annual conventions where several hundred members of free society would come and hear prisoners give speeches that educated the public on the need for change. Annually, the CLO and BPC interacted with around a thousand free citizens each year.

Through work done at WSR, relationships were cultivated, and people in free society were able to see prisoners as members of their communities working towards common goals. This opened pathways to clemency for prisoners engaged in the work. By 2020, people in the community tied to WSR as volunteers were working in tandem with prisoners confined there to — as Alexander called for — “make a break for freedom in the era of mass incarceration.” These social structures served as an Underground Railroad, with the prison itself a kind of Harper's Ferry.

“They had a building called the [Prisoner Activity Building or PAB] at WSR that was fought for, prisoners fought for that space to have a place to organize,” Sitthivong reflected. “And I believe personally, in my heart, that prisoners who fought for that space fought for it not to strengthen the prison but to get free. I think that some of the narrative behind keeping the prison open is that, since prisoners fought for the PAB, it would be a shame to close it down. No, I think that actually disrespects the legacy of resistance. We can't disrespect that legacy, and we can't drop the baton. I feel like using that space to add more bars and razor wire; it just doesn't make any sense to me.”

## **PRISON REALISM**

We will do well to remember this: the carceral state is a rational actor playing a zero-sum game, and we should analyze its actions through the lens of Realism, the very lens that informs its calculus. The carceral state does not seek actions that work towards its own demise.

What happens when the next cost-cutting move is disguised by the carceral state as decarceration? Will members of our community, in attempts to achieve change, side with the interests of state entities like WDOC in the future?

This author fears the answer is yes, and predicts we will see this play out in Washington State in the 2024 legislative session.

In a 2022 interview on Inside Olympia, WDOC Secretary Cheryl Strange stated that 30,000 individuals are waiting to be sentenced by the courts. Of those, 10,000 are charged with violent felonies. This will invariably mean reopening prisons like WSR, prisons that never really closed anyway. But the math does not work. Adding this many potential new prisoners would put the Washington prison population way over capacity.

Shadowproof caught up with Sitthivong, who was a Marvel Cooke Fellow in 2022, to get his perspective on the closure and its impact on abolitionist work in the state.

“In hindsight, I wish we had stuck together and made sure it stayed closed instead of dividing us and allowing DOC to do soft closure,” Sitthivong said in an interview. “We should have demanded they actually release people instead of fighting for a structure.”

“But for me, the silver lining was we were able to go to these other facilities, highlight the other facilities that were malnourished and did not have support but were also our peers and our colleagues. An effort to keep [WSR open] was almost an effort to hoard the resources rather than say, hey, systemically, 90 percent of the prisons were not being served, prisoners were left to fend for themselves. Now we have this organizing space here at a different facility. So it wasn’t a building or prison or bars; it was us. And I think a lot of people forget that.”

Sitthivong said he disagreed with the notion that the closure hurt abolitionist organizing. “The abolitionist community that I am from and represent and organize with that’s been split up are still organizing, are still fighting. I just went through retaliation for organizing. This is nothing new for people who have been in movements and struggle for generations and carry that legacy. We continue to spread the word, and wherever we touch down we provide resources and continue to empower our people and shift power from the state to our people. That’s the mission, that’s the goal.”

“Even though I have very strong stances, I love my community with all my heart,” he said. “I want to be able to humanize people’s fears and humanize people’s concerns. I don’t want to be like, “Oh, I don’t give a shit.” I don’t want to come off like that. I want to honor that and still [have the others] also honor our position. Honor that there were sacrifices made before you.”

Prisoners across the state knew that if they wanted to sail toward clemency, WSR was the place where they could find a boat.

Prisoners at WSR were stringently working for abolition. This work included dismantling the preschool-to-prison and foster-care-to-prison pipelines. CLO and BPC legislative committees worked in tandem to draft bills and lead legislative efforts for change. The BPC and CLO created a college, University Beyond Bars, where all prisoners—regardless of time structure or immigration status—could pursue higher education. In 2018, the BPC and CLO worked with Collective Justice to create HEAL, a class where prisoners worked with crime victims in restorative justice processes focused on healing from trauma.

By January 2020, prisoners at WSR had built enough momentum to organize the Rally To End Mass Incarceration, where hundreds of protestors showed up on a cold winter night demanding change at the steps of the state capitol. We were just getting started.

In Washington State, there was no movement to end mass incarceration that had the reach and diversity of the one led by the prisoners confined at WSR. In circles at WSR, people of every race, religious affiliation, or demographic—even members of rival gangs—found common cause and solidarity in collective efforts for transformation. Here, for a time, the movement was truly beautiful.

And then the COVID pandemic happened. Everything came to a halt. The murder of George Floyd happened, and conversations on abolition increased with the Defund The Police demand. Having lost the illusion of the moral high ground for a brief moment in time, the power of the carceral state seemed in jeopardy. As the pandemic raged into 2021, WDOC faced a financial and staffing crisis, bleeding human capital as prisoners were released under decriminalization laws. The carceral state was weakening and looking for strategic ways to maintain the status quo in the face of sweeping change.

According to a WDOC News Spotlight article, the department had seen a 54 percent decrease in prison admissions during the height of the pandemic from March 2020 to June 2021. The lack of human capital and a proposed budget decrease of \$80 million over two years by Governor Jay Inslee made other stressors, such as concerns about overtime pay for guards, primary concerns for WDOC. Here, the state claimed to lose more staff than it could retain and that these vacancies led to increases in overtime pay. The proposed closure would allow the state to immediately reduce high levels of overtime, noting that “nearly a quarter of those hours were incurred at the Monroe Correctional Complex,” which included WSR, WDOC’s prime target for closure.

But, this proposed closure was to be a “warm closure,” meaning the prison would leave the lights on and keep a skeleton crew of guards working nearly empty units. This type of closure would allow the prison to reopen, at a later date, without having to bring the 100-year-old infrastructure up to code before repopulating the cellblocks. Two years later, WSR is now gearing up to do just that.

## **WARM CLOSURE**

Robert Alderson, one of a handful of prisoners who remained at WSR after the “warm closure,” recently transferred from there to the Washington Corrections Center. He told Shadowproof, “When I left, [WDOC was] taking bids to repaint and resurface the units. They just put new mattresses in all the cells and installed a brand new WiFi system.”

“The closure of WSR was abolition in one respect,” said Darrell Jackson, member of the Black Prisoners Caucus and Co-Chair of BPC TEACH. “It abolished those groups. The things DOC took during the pandemic were the very things you guys had there at WSR. We didn’t have those things at the other prisons where I was at, but because you guys had

fence has the opportunity to “work with free people on projects (educational, professional, or otherwise) that would permit them to develop or display the qualities that would have to be observed for them to merit employment or clemency.”

In other words, WDOC will not allow any new Devon Adams or Eugene Youngbloods to develop within these walls and fences. Rafay’s analysis of the closure was that it was “designed to make incarceration more efficient and cheap, as well as to disable the movements that were critical of mass incarceration.” His sentiment is shared by many.

When asked if the voices who supported the closure of WSR aided WDOC in this objective, Rafay took a breath, then said, “They helped misrepresent a cost-cutting plan that smashed the networks most effective in enabling prisoners to engage in meaningful activity... and they perpetuated the confusion between genuinely transformative decarceral changes and plans that distract or deter prisoners from pursuing those changes.”

Sitthivong, as a prominent voice for the closure, wrote, “the programming either goes where we go, no matter where we go, or it should cease to exist.” But others argue social networks and transformative structures are not shrubs. You can’t just pick them up from here and plant them there, expecting they will function. Not when oppressors own the soil. Sitthivong did not see it this way, and some felt the division he fomented drowned out more reasoned voices that were fighting against the interests of WDOC, trying to hold on to the Underground Railroad.

That these programs should “cease to exist” was the endeavor of WDOC, and abolitionists should have stood in solidarity against the interests of these oppressors. It is unclear if solidarity could have changed the outcome. But some are arguing that voices siding with WDOC undermined resistance efforts to hold on to the Underground Railroad built by prisoners at WSR.

Then, in August 2023, this author published an op-ed with the Seattle Times excoriating the Washington Department of Corrections for attacking programs in the state's prisons. The article elicited push-back from the community and engaged Secretary Strange on the issue of the Concerned Lifer's Organization being canceled. Initially, Strange denied the claims in the article, but after CLO sponsors presented evidence to Strange, Washington Corrections Center suddenly saw the value of the organization. In September of that year, the group was reinstated.

This episode illustrates the propensity of oppressive forces to attack transformative spaces but also shows that, through community action and solidarity, wins can be secured against the carceral state. This leaves organizers like this author considering that the transformative space we had at WSR could have been saved through solidarity.

Another transformative space to come under attack by WDOC is BPC TEACH, an education program that facilitates liberation education, providing access for prisoners to obtain college degrees.

In the winter of 2022, WDOC leveraged Fabian's Fund, the financier of BPC TEACH, into a Memorandum of Understanding. This contract set restrictions and established a kill mechanism in its charter. At the time, journalists Chris Blackwell and myself reported to the Everett Herald that this bullied them into an arrangement feeling "an awful lot like a knee above their necks, thinly veiled as a promise to let them breathe." In May 2023, the knee dropped, and WDOC severed the ability of BPC TEACH to fund its students, leaving prisoners without the ability to continue their degrees.

Atif Rafay is an incarcerated journalist, abolitionist, and scholar. When WSR closed, he was transferred within the Monroe Correctional Complex to the Twin Rivers facility. One fence line now separates him from the ghost of WSR. Rafay told Shadowproof, "The hub of activity at WSR that made for expanding networks of opportunity and participation in the world of new ideas and movements has been smashed..." He noted that no one in the new institution he ended up in just across the

them there, we were able to fight for them as well. Now they just don't exist at all, and DOC ain't giving them back."

Jackson's comments echo the fears of some incarcerated organizers as WDOC began maneuvering to "close" WSR. And this possibility was obvious to most of the people involved in liberation efforts across the state.

Vincent "Tank" Sherrill is a champion of abolition efforts in Washington state, a longtime leader in the BPC, and one of the prisoners displaced by the closure of WSR. Tank reminisced about what prisoners had. "We created an activist and organizer university inside the Reformatory," he said. "We were literally given the tools to dismantle the master's house right under the master's nose."

Nothing exemplifies Tank's point more than the work now being conducted by those who benefited from the Underground Railroad at WSR. Many of those who were liberated from there are now in society, participating in and building new structures to displace the carceral state.

Devon Adams was released in 2021 from a 30-year year sentence. Once a leader in both the BPC and CLO, Adams currently works with Collective Justice, providing trauma-informed training to youth most likely to be involved with gun violence.

"We actually have to take these kids out of town in order to get them to relax and feel safe enough to fully engage in this process," Adams said. A former victim and participant in street violence, he is acutely familiar with the social pressure and fear these youth face in the streets. Adams is taking what he learned from HEAL and applying it to this next generation of youth, disrupting cycles of violence that the carceral state exploits in order to keep the prison industrial complex alive.

When asked about the role prisoner-led organizations at WSR played in his life, one word jumps out from the rest: "community." Adams told Shadowproof that the community found at WSR was like no other and

that it helped him answer questions about who he could be. “When I got out, that community was intact, allowing me to continue the work we were doing inside now that I am free.”

Eugene Youngblood, another beneficiary of the Underground Railroad, is also applying what he learned at WSR in the community since his release. Youngblood says, “Once, I was on one side of the gun, now I’m on the other side of the gun, working with families of gun victims.” Youngblood currently works through the Freedom Project and dream.org, where he does court support, violence interruption, and teaches classes at the King County Juvenile Detention Center.

Youngblood told Shadowproof, “People don’t change, they heal.” He said that relationships with community members, especially the frequency and consistency of those relationships at WSR, were what made the difference. “It is impossible to replicate the involvement of the community without the actual involvement of community.” He believes this is what gave prisoners at WSR chances like those he enjoyed and that these relationships “benefited everyone except for DOC.”

Abolition-minded prisoners who stood against the closure of WSR understood that prisons are not in the business of decarceration. So, when WDOC came out with their plan to shut down the prison, many saw this as a maneuver to kill two birds with one stone: WDOC would reallocate money while eliminating opposition groups that had grown over decades at WSR—groups that existed nowhere else in the state prison system.

Long accustomed to practicing the discipline of hope, some initially approached this with optimism. Tank told Shadowproof that when he first heard about the closure, he imagined “those of us with the training spreading the seeds of abolition, revolution, and transformation like Johnny Appleseed.” But, this vision has been stymied through actions by WDOC to limit and prevent this very thing from happening, lending evidence to the theory that the closure was about furthering oppression.

The social and political landscape inside prisons that emerged from the closure of WSR reveals a design beyond addressing fiscal concerns. Since the closure, WDOC has prevented similar groups from forming at new facilities. Meanwhile, the few bastions of transformation that once existed outside of WSR in Washington prisons — culture groups and BPC TEACH — are now under attack as well.

Tank now laments the landscape prisoners are facing in WDOC. He said the Black Prisoner’s Caucus has recently come under attack and is “fighting for its existence.”

Felix Sitthivong, a proponent for the closure of WSR, is now currently fighting with WDOC for the existence of cultural groups at Stafford Creek Corrections Center.

## **CRACKING DOWN**

At Washington Corrections Center, prisoners were able to start the Concerned Lifer’s Organization (CLO), only to have prison administrators kill the organization after two months of meetings. When Dr. Katherine Beckett—a lead sponsor for the CLO and esteemed member of the community—inquired about the matter, she was told the group was canceled because another administrator at the prison didn’t follow clerical procedure. The CLO was told that a series of paperwork and approvals would be necessary in order to meet again.

Over the next five months, CLO sponsors worked with prison administrators to restart the group. After supplying the newly required paperwork, sponsors were told the group would not be allowed going forward because sponsors could not prove the value of the organization. Meanwhile, DOC Media Relations Manager Toby Hatley told reporters that the Washington Department of Corrections had never heard of the Concerned Lifer’s Organization—a program with a 50-year history at WSR.