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Former high-security inmate Earl Fears prepares on Tuesday to share his experiences at Corcoran State Prison, which he says caused emotional stress.

## High-security prison units face review

BY SAM STANTON  
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Facing a barrage of criticism over how California inmates are treated inside high-security detention units, a top prison official said Tuesday that new policies will be reviewed and some changes may be made in coming months.

"I'm not talking about having another study," Scott Kernan, undersecretary at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, said at a legislative hearing. "I'm talking about having some substantive changes."

The hearing, called by Assembly Public Safety Committee Chairman Tom Ammiano, D-San Francisco, came in response to a hunger strike that began at Pelican Bay State Prison last month by inmates protesting their living conditions.

The strike spread to more than 6,000 inmates, including some California prisoners housed out of state, before inmates agreed to halt it after three weeks.

Inmates called off the strike after prison officials made some concessions and promised to review policies over how inmates end up in a security housing unit, or SHU, generally considered placements for the most dangerous prisoners.

On Tuesday, a parade of witnesses testified that conditions inside the state's SHUs are similar to torture, and that inmates are confined in solitary confinement up to 23½ hours a day.

"I admit to being a small-time crack dealer, I admit to being an alcoholic, I admit to being a small-time burglar," said Earl Fears, who spent time inside the SHU at Corcoran State Prison.

ran State Prison.

But, Fears said, conditions in the SHU caused great emotional stress, especially when guards decided to skip allowing inmates time to shower or refused to provide toilet paper or deliver medicine on schedule.

"I am human, and by being human I do have certain rights ...," he said.

Others who spoke said inmates find themselves locked up in the SHUs for decades, sometimes based on accusations by confidential informants they are never allowed to refute.

The Legislature has studied complaints before about how corrections officials decide to place an inmate inside a security housing unit, but changes have been slow in coming, something Ammiano

said he planned to change after more hearings. "I am committed to making sure there is some movement on this," he said.

Kernan responded by saying corrections officials are compiling policies from 28 other states that have similar units and that California wants to revise certain policies "in a matter of months, not years."

He provided few details, but said inmates will likely be judged on a weighted system that allows them to "earn" their way out of a SHU by appropriate behavior.

He added that the average stay in the SHU at Pelican Bay is currently 6.8 years.

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