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*Death Under Watch*

# Photos reveal stark isolation inside Mass. prison units tied to suicides: 'God help me'

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Investigative photos obtained from the Norfolk County District Attorney's Office show the inside of the behavioral assessment unit at MCI-Norfolk. In this cell, a prisoner died of a medical emergency last year. Two other prisoners in the unit died by suicide. (Courtesy of Norfolk County District Attorney/Mass. State Police)

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Editor's note: This article contains photographs of a solitary confinement unit where deaths have occurred.

**MASS** **LIVE**

The small, steel cells — mottled with peeling paint, rust and water stains — house thin mattresses laid atop narrow metal frames.

There is a toilet, a sink, a metal shelf and a wall-mounted desk/seat unit. The floor-to-ceiling doors — less an entrance than a seal — have a single porthole window bolted in place with rivets and a food slot below, opening out into a long corridor.

On some of the cell walls, desperate scribbles read:

*"God help me and every believer"*

*"40 days strong"*

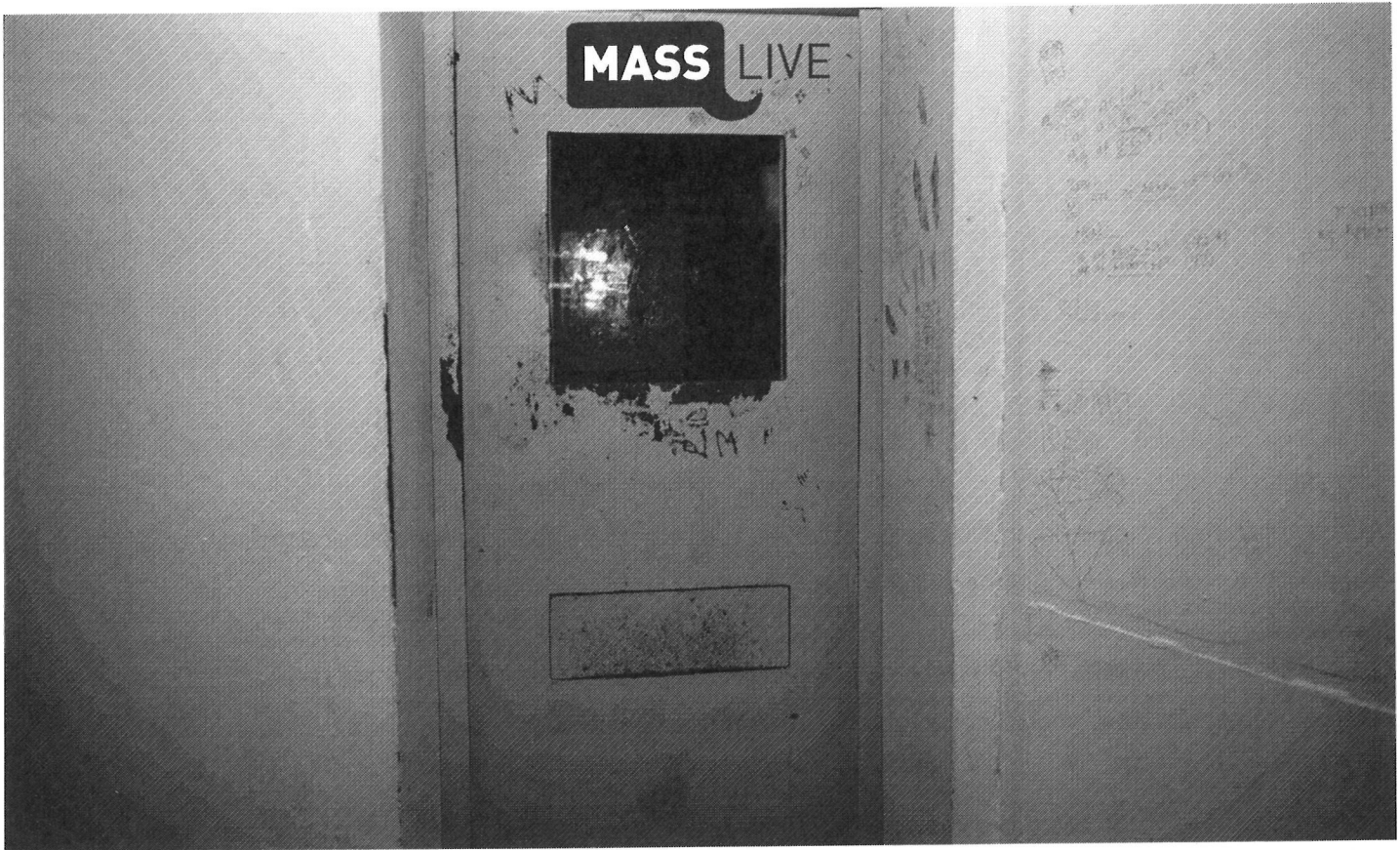
*"Defeat is not a part of my destiny"*

In one cell where a prisoner died by suicide, a copy of "Chicken Soup for the Prisoner's Soul" is open on the floor.

Photographs obtained by MassLive reveal the inside of a Massachusetts prison unit where prisoners are held alone in their cells for up to 21 hours a day — one hour short of the state's definition of solitary confinement, or "restricted housing."

Despite a sweeping 2018 state criminal justice law intended to significantly hinder the practice, critics say the conditions still imitate solitary confinement — regardless of the one-hour difference.

The behavioral assessment units (BAUs) are also where half of **last year's prisoner suicides** occurred within the state Department of Correction. In 2025, there were more suicides in the prison system — six — than in the prior three years combined.



Investigative photos obtained from the Norfolk County District Attorney's Office show the inside of the behavioral assessment unit at MCI-Norfolk. In this cell, a prisoner died of a medical emergency last year. Two other prisoners in the unit died by suicide. (Norfolk County District Attorney/Mass. State Police)

The scores of photos — obtained through public records requests — come from three death investigations conducted by Massachusetts State Police between April and October 2025. They show the BAU inside MCI-Norfolk, the state's largest medium-security prison — inaccessible to public view, until now.

Last year, three men hanged themselves with bedsheets in the BAUs at MCI-Norfolk and Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center.

The Worcester County District Attorney's Office denied MassLive's records request seeking documents and photos related to **the Souza-Baranowski BAU death** — MassLive is currently appealing the denial to the state.

The debate over BAUs and their predecessor, solitary confinement, is far from novel. A Boston Globe article from 20 years ago shows the same dispute playing out almost verbatim: of seven prisoner suicides across the prison system in 2006, two had occurred in segregated cells or units. Today, BAUs can also be described as segregated units.

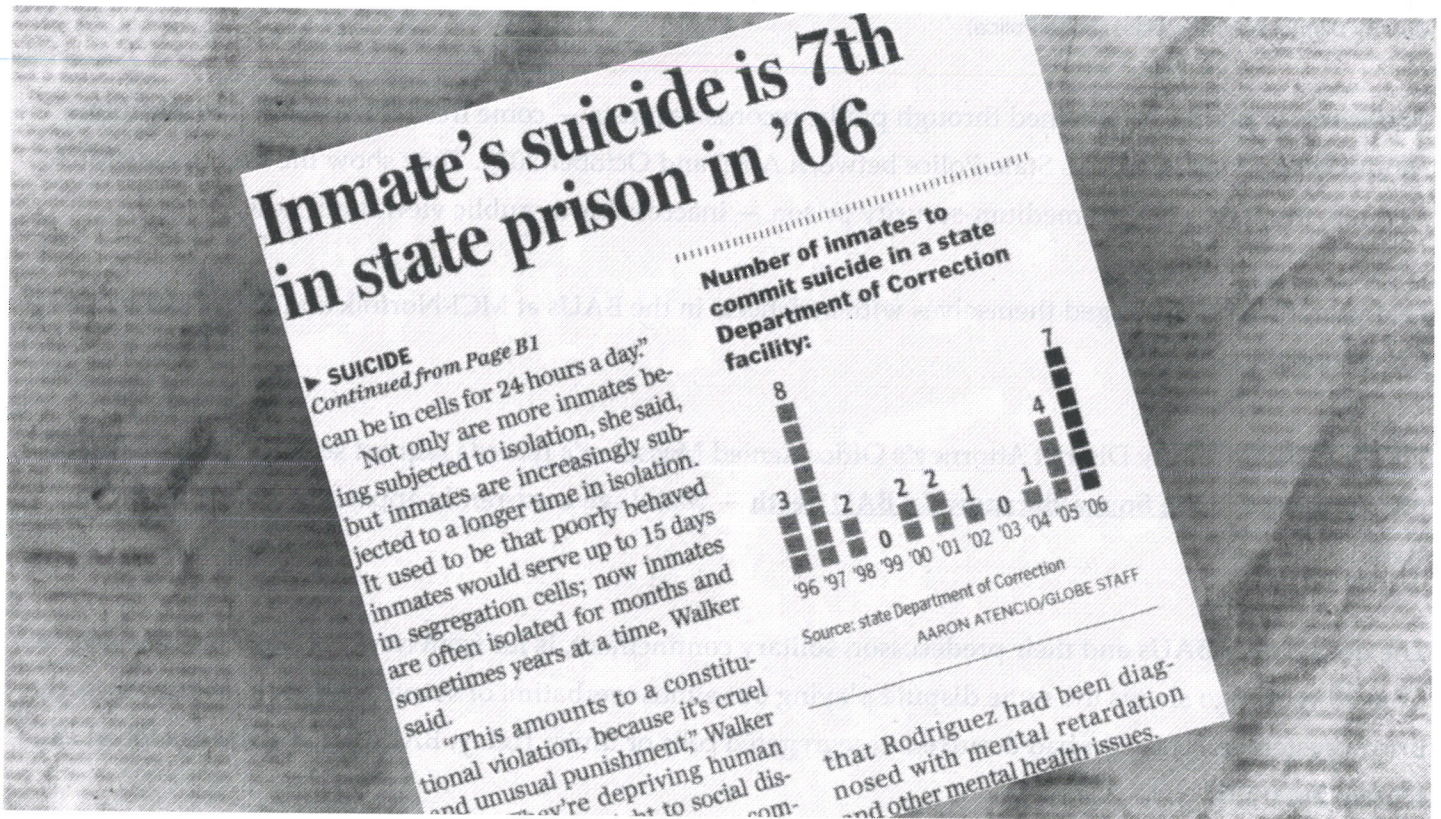
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Advocates rang the alarm that 2006 had seen more suicides than the past four years combined, as more prisoners were purportedly being subjected to isolation.

The Globe article centered on the December 2006 suicide of Glenn Bourgeois, who was serving life in prison for first-degree murder when he was found hanging by a bedsheet in a segregation cell where previous suicides had occurred.

“There isn’t evidence of a larger pattern,” a DOC spokesperson said at the time.



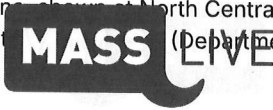
A Boston Globe article from December 2006 shows the debate over prison suicides and segregated housing units is far from new. (Illustration by John Beattie/MassLive)

BAUs, referred to as “the hole” by prisoners, were introduced by the DOC in 2022 as an alternative to solitary confinement, or “restricted housing,” after the state’s Criminal Justice Reform Act of 2018 sharply limited the practice.

According to the DOC, BAUs are structured locations “for short-term assessment and stabilization” to divert prisoners determined to be an “unacceptable risk” to the general population.

In a March interview, DOC Commissioner Shawn Jenkins said the revamped units “are meant to set people up for success,” and he pushed back on any notions that they still resemble what came before.





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But critics and many incarcerated individuals contend BAUs are essentially the same solitary confinement they were supposed to replace. Meanwhile, the DOC is **under active monitoring** by the federal Department of Justice for its mental health practices.

And inside BAUs, those same critics say, mental health interactions often last between one and five minutes — an account corroborated by an independent correctional mental health expert hired by the DOC.

**Prisoners' Legal Services of Massachusetts recently condemned the DOC** for policies that, it said, "warehouse people with mental illness in solitary-like units." The comments come as part of the group's advocacy for prison reform bills under consideration at the State House.

The nonprofit, and an active class action lawsuit it is pursuing on the matter, say the BAUs are the same spaces as the former restricted housing units. The DOC acknowledged that some units were repurposed.

"It's like trying to turn lead into gold," said Dr. Stuart Grassian, a psychiatrist and former Harvard Medical School faculty member, who has evaluated the psychiatric effects of solitary confinement in both federal and state prison/jail settings.

Grassian reviewed the images obtained by MassLive and cited studies showing that it is seven-10 times more likely "for someone in that type of confinement to commit suicide."

**A February 2024 DOJ Inspector General investigation** of deaths in federal prisons, for example, found that of 187 suicides examined, 46% occurred in restrictive housing settings, including solitary confinement.

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"You feel desperate, hopeless," Grassian said. "Totally helpless."

In a statement this week, a DOC spokesperson said the agency has made "operational, clinical and infrastructure" improvements within the BAUs.

"Recognizing the complexity of supporting those with behavioral and mental health challenges," the spokesperson said, "the Department of Correction remains committed to strengthening its approach to care and custody by incorporating national best practices and the perspective of qualified experts like Dr. Sharen Barboza," the independent correctional mental health care expert hired last year after the spike in suicides.

The DOC also pointed to a first-of-its-kind after-hours **wellness hotline** it implemented for prisoners, as well as a recent move to provide clinicians with better access to real-time health care records via tablets.

Between Jan. 1 and April 6, the hotline received 172 calls, according to data from a records request.

**PHOTOS:**

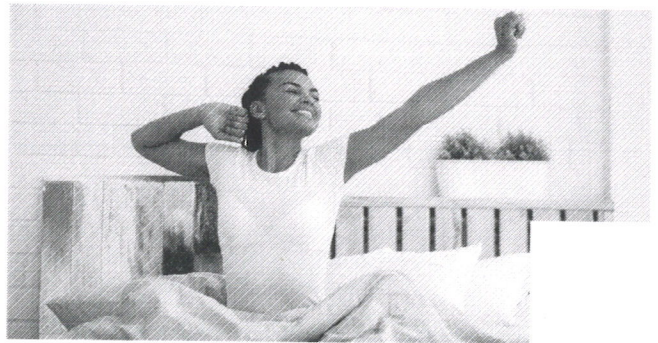


Photos obtained by MassLive through public records requests show the inside of the behavioral assessment unit (BAU) at MCI-Norfolk, a hotly-debated segregated housing unit where suicides have occurred. These photos are from post-incident investigations following three deaths in 2025. Photos showing bedsheets used for hanging have been redacted.

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In response to 2018's criminal justice reform and [a 2021 independent report](#) on the issue, the DOC announced it would phase out and effectively eliminate all restricted housing. Today, DOC officials contend no restrictive housing exists in any of their facilities.

As part of the reforms, the DOC dismantled its notorious Department Disciplinary Unit, where men could be held in solitary conditions for up to 10 years.

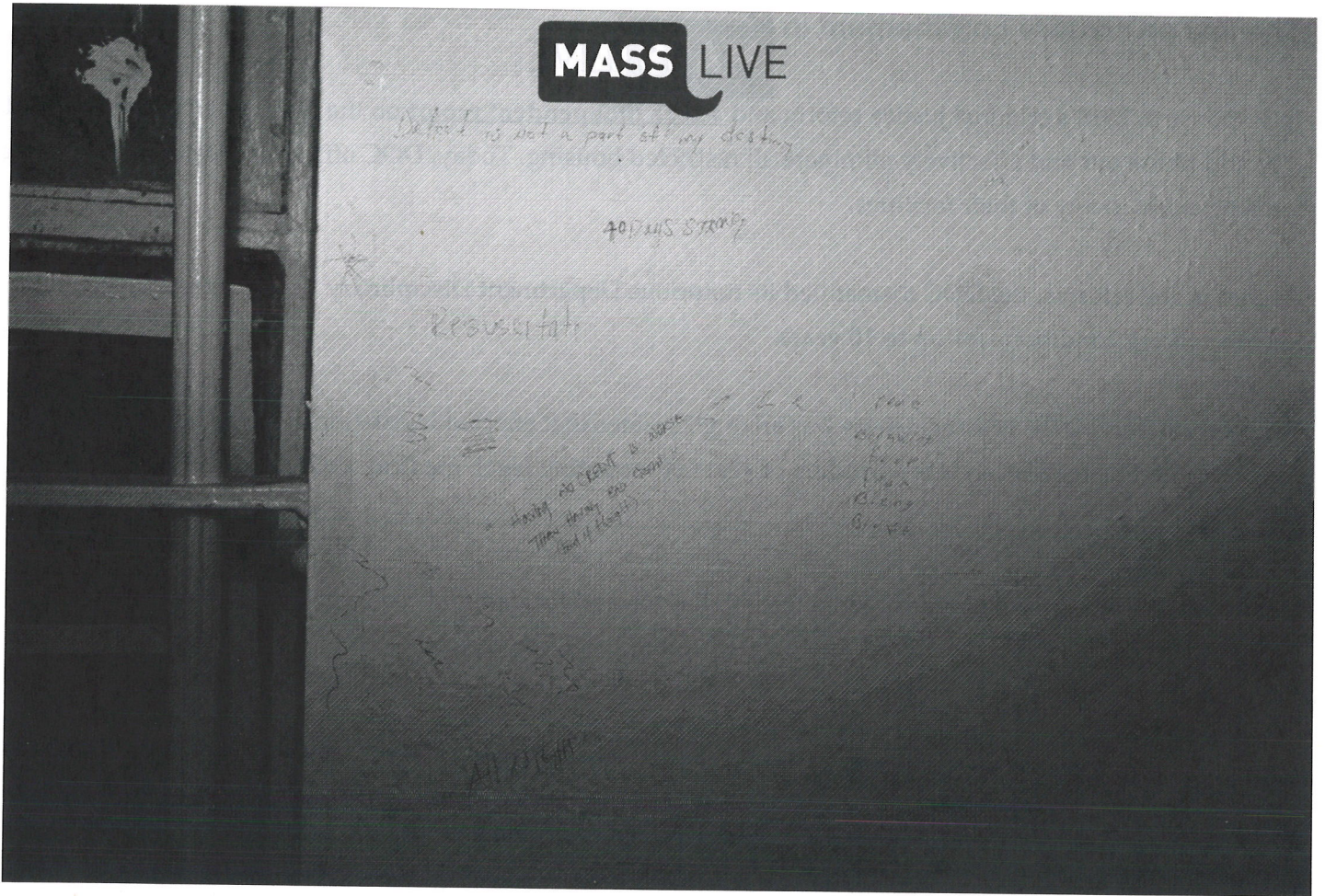
Between 2018 and 2021, Massachusetts was among 22 states that enacted legislation to curb the use of solitary confinement. The legislation was a product of years of mounting legal, medical, political and advocacy pressure.

The Massachusetts Association for Mental Health has long advocated that "solitary confinement exacerbates pre-existing psychological conditions and may, in and of itself, cause such conditions."

Prior to [the state's 2018 law change](#), prisoners in the commonwealth's segregated units could legally be held alone in their cells for up to 22 hours a day.

The new law significantly limited the uses of solitary confinement/restricted housing for discipline only, or if placement in the general population posed an "unacceptable risk."

The law, which also created a Restrictive Housing Oversight Committee, required the same access to visits, calls, canteen goods and programming while in restricted housing, as well as placement reviews three times a week.



Post-incident photos show writings on a cell wall inside of the behavioral assessment unit at MCI-Norfolk. (Norfolk County District Attorney/Mass. State Police)

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Today, in the DOC's alternative, prisoners in BAUs can be held in cells as small as 8-by-10 feet for up to 21 hours, one hour short of the state's definition of restricted housing.

"Unacceptable risk" is the same wording the DOC uses to describe reasoning for BAU placement.

DOC data **shows** that among nearly 800 people in BAUs during the first quarter of 2026, the median stay was seven days. The average stay was 14 days, **MASS LIVE** the median — because fewer people were held for longer.

Most individuals stay one to 10 days, though some are held for three months or longer, data shows.

Critics say the units are functionally indistinguishable from solitary confinement, and a class action lawsuit currently pending in Suffolk County Superior Court contends the DOC is flouting the 2018 law.

“This type of situation, I’ve seen this in a number of jurisdictions where legislation or litigation has resulted in some prohibition of prolonged solitary confinement, so the correctional system re-labels what was solitary confinement as something else,” Grassian, the psychiatrist, said. “They’re all not very different from the kind of conditions and policies and practices that existed in solitary.”

But Jenkins argues BAUs aren’t punitive units and are, in fact, different from restrictive housing. He said prisoners have access to “robust” programming during a stay in the BAU, citing increased out-of-cell time as one distinction.

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According to the DOC, prisoners in BAUs have access to tablets, all educational programming, health services, recreation, spiritual services, case management, reentry services, phone calls and in-person/virtual visits.

The agency also cited specific programming around violence, recovery and “criminal thinking” as available during a BAU stay.

Prisoners in BAUs are shackled for all out-of-cell time, according to **DOC policy**.

“Those units are designed to address people’s reasons for being there, and their behavior while there,” Jenkins said in March. “It’s not a punitive measure. It’s a holistic look at why they’re there.”

Not everyone who has stepped inside a BAU **MASS LIVE** ation in 2022 agrees.

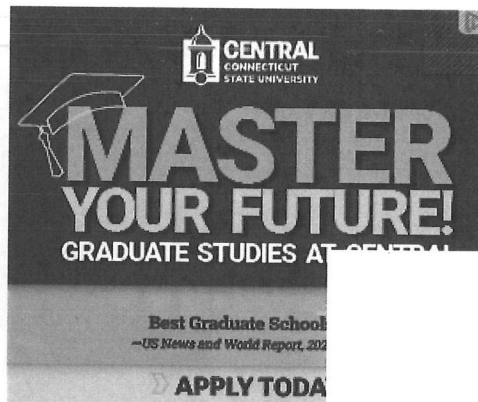
**“All of the things we had attempted with the laws we passed in 2018 are clearly not being followed. To me, it is not a surprise at all that there has been an increase in suicides out of desperation.”**

Rep. Erika Uytterhoeven, D-27th Middlesex

“It’s horrifying,” said Rep. Erika Uytterhoeven, D-27th Middlesex, who has visited various BAUs many times. “I have trouble putting words to how disturbing it is.”

In Massachusetts, state law requires legislators to have access to DOC facilities without notice. Otherwise, Uytterhoeven said, “it’s very rare for anyone to be able to witness solitary confinement.”

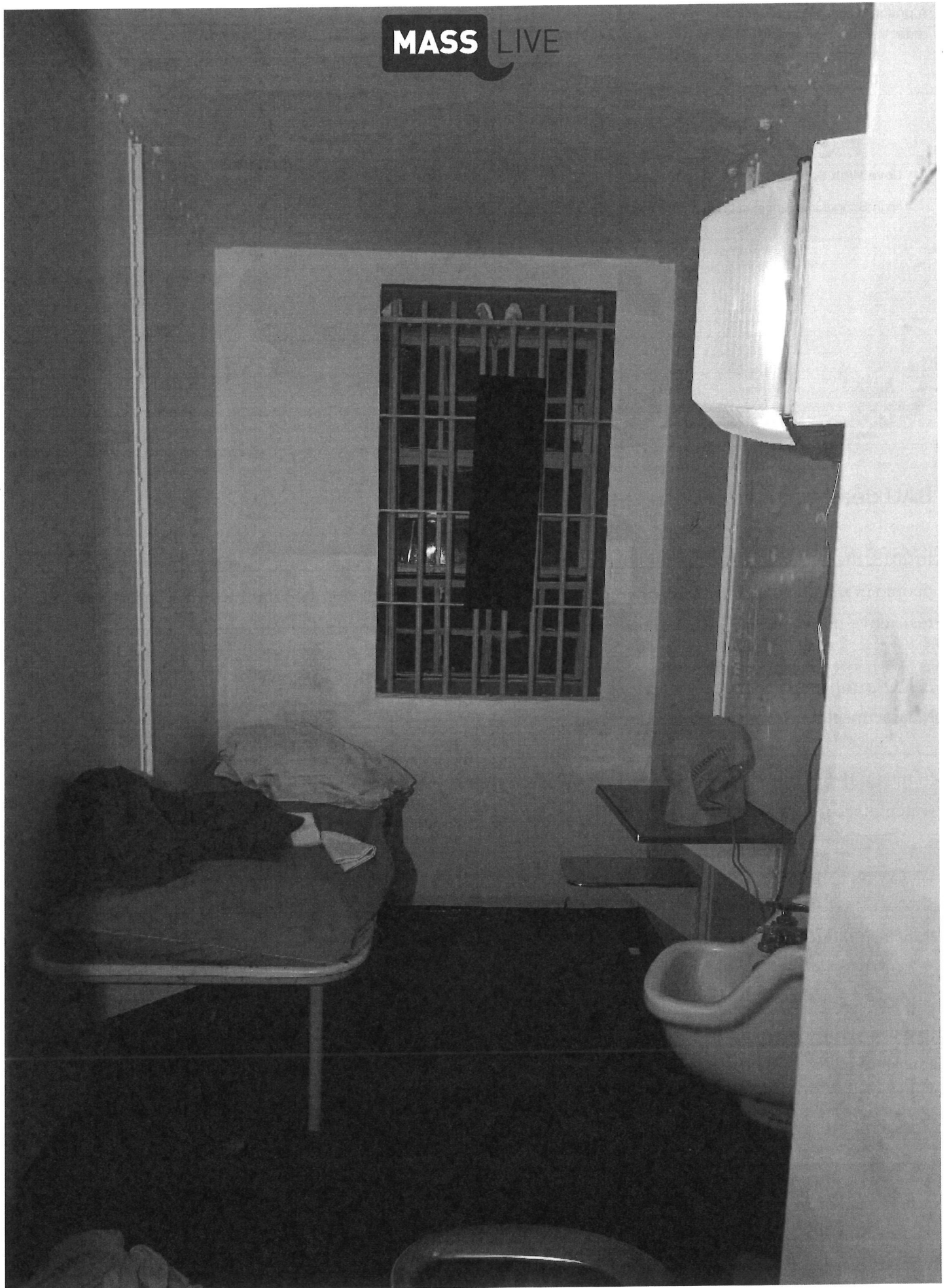
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“All of the things we had attempted with the laws we passed in 2018 are clearly not being followed,” she said. “To me, it is not a surprise at all that there has been an increase in suicides out of desperation.”

The units were also pinpointed by Dr. Sharen Barboza, a contracted correctional mental health expert, as one factor in a broader crisis involving substance use — particularly the prison drug “K2” — and a breakdown in mental health care delivery within the DOC last year.

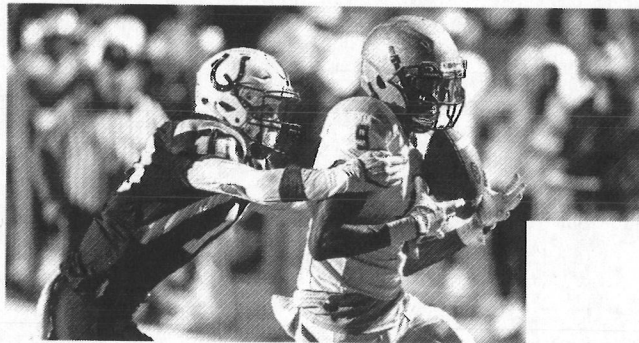
“There is no simple or easy answer, yet the frequency with which the deaths by suicide in 2025 included substance use and BAU placement cannot be overlooked,” Barboza wrote in a January report.



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## **BAU deaths last year include three suicides**

In 2018, the Department of Justice launched an investigation into how the DOC cared for and supervised people in mental health crises, many of whom were often placed in what was, at the time, considered restrictive housing. The DOC has been under continuous federal monitoring since.

**A DOJ progress report from March 2025** noted that more than 32% of individuals on mental health watch in Massachusetts prisons were placed in BAUs.

In the **DOJ's most recent progress report**, released this March, the percentage of prisoners on mental health watch placed in BAUs remained similar — at 30%.

Last year, six prisoners died by suicide across MCI-Norfolk, Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center and MCI-Shirley, three of whom were housed in BAUs. A fourth prisoner died by suicide the day after being transferred out of a BAU.

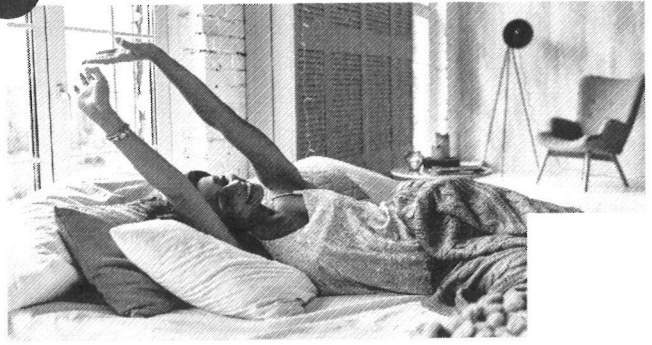
Since BAUs were created in April 2022, there have been five total deaths in the units, four of which were suicides, according to data obtained by MassLive and The Republican. The fifth death was a medical emergency.

Massachusetts did not have standardized statewide reporting on restrictive housing or related outcomes prior to the 2018 criminal justice reform law, which established new data collection requirements.

All three suicides in BAUs last year occurred in the same manner — hanging by bedsheet from window bars, according to investigative records and photos.

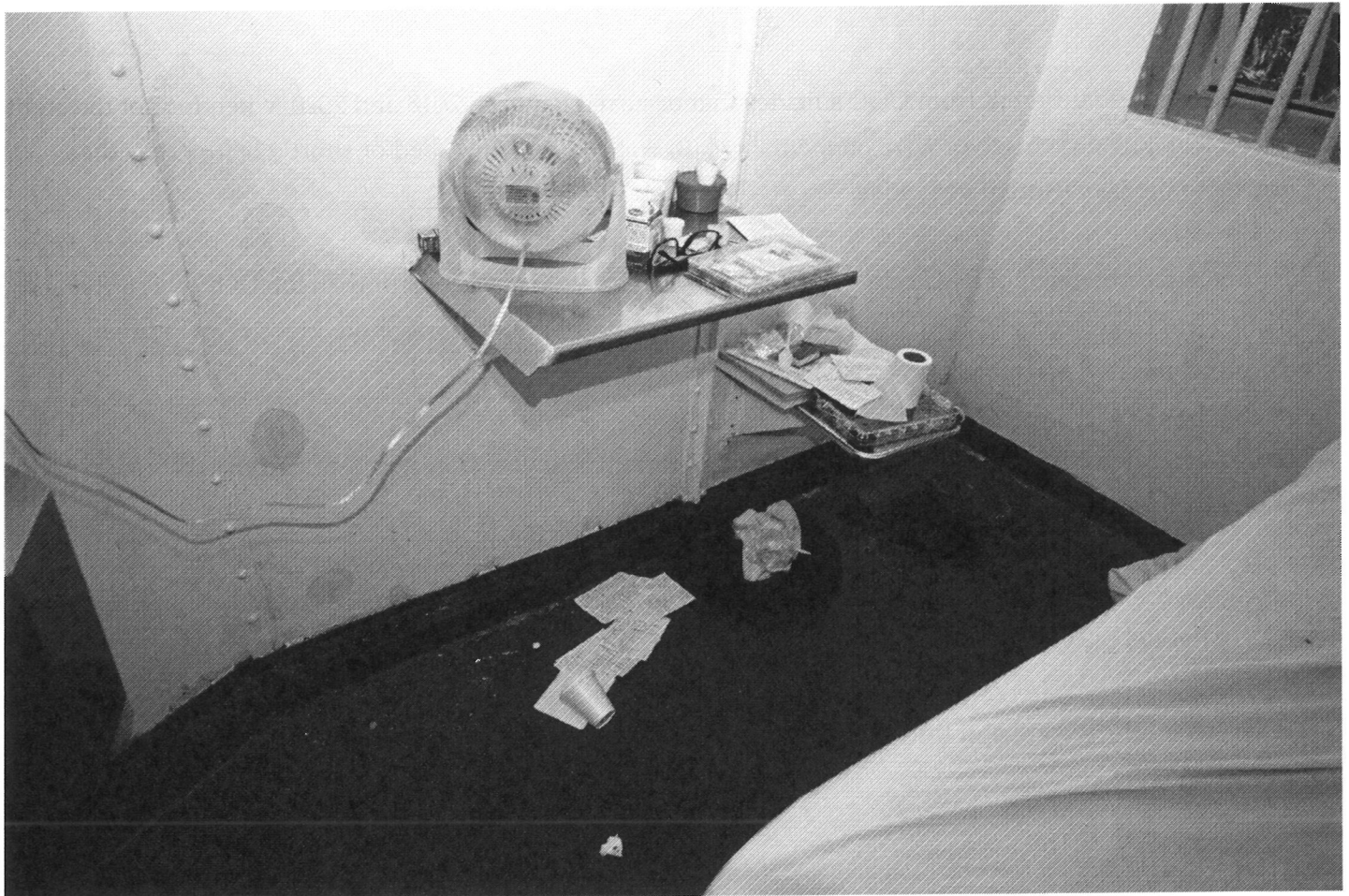
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Some of the obtained photos show unsecured electrical cords powering table fans, which also pose a possible suicide risk.



Investigative photos obtained from the Norfolk County District Attorney's Office show an electrical cord powering a fan. The Department of Justice requires ligature hazards, such as electrical cords, to be removed from housing for individuals in mental health crisis. (Norfolk County District Attorney/Mass. State Police)

Both the National Commission on Correctional Health Care and the Department of Justice require the identification and removal of ligature hazards in housing for individuals in mental health crisis.

Barboza's report, which she submitted in January, identified four of the six individuals who died by suicide last year were part of the mental health caseload. **MASS LIVE** been seen within the previous 17 days by a mental health professional. Four of the individuals also reported previous suicide attempts.

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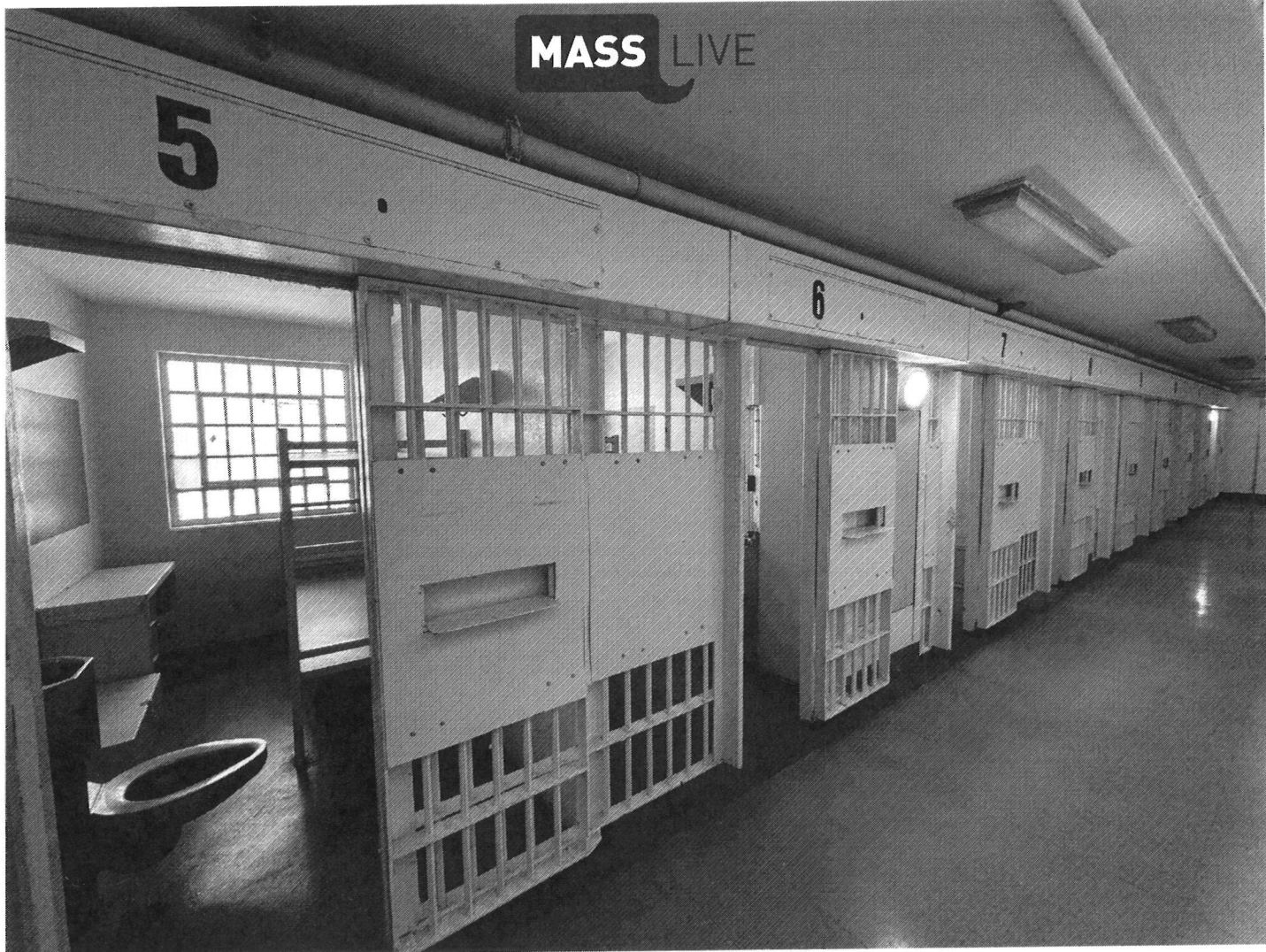
That picture isn't so different from DOC suicides that occurred between 2018 and 2020, when four of the eight prisoners who killed themselves were on mental health watch when they died or shortly before they died, **according to the Department of Justice.**

A ligature risk assessment of BAU cells is part of the DOC's ongoing agreement with the DOJ — a settlement the state agency entered in 2022 to avoid being sued for purported violations of the Eighth Amendment, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment.

As recently as April 2025, the DOC's own Morbidity/Mortality Review Committee at Souza-Baranowski reiterated the need for a review of ligature risks in BAU cells.

**As of March**, the DOC had achieved substantial compliance (versus partial compliance or noncompliance) with 51 of the 125 provisions of the DOJ agreement to reform its mental health practices, representing 41%.

The DOC noted the second and third floors of the MCI-Norfolk BAU were vacated after last year's suicides, and to date remain empty.



For comparison, this photo shows general population cells at the now-closed MCI-Concord, depicting the difference from BAU cells. (Charlie McKenna/MassLive)

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**Mental health care inside BAUs has been limited**

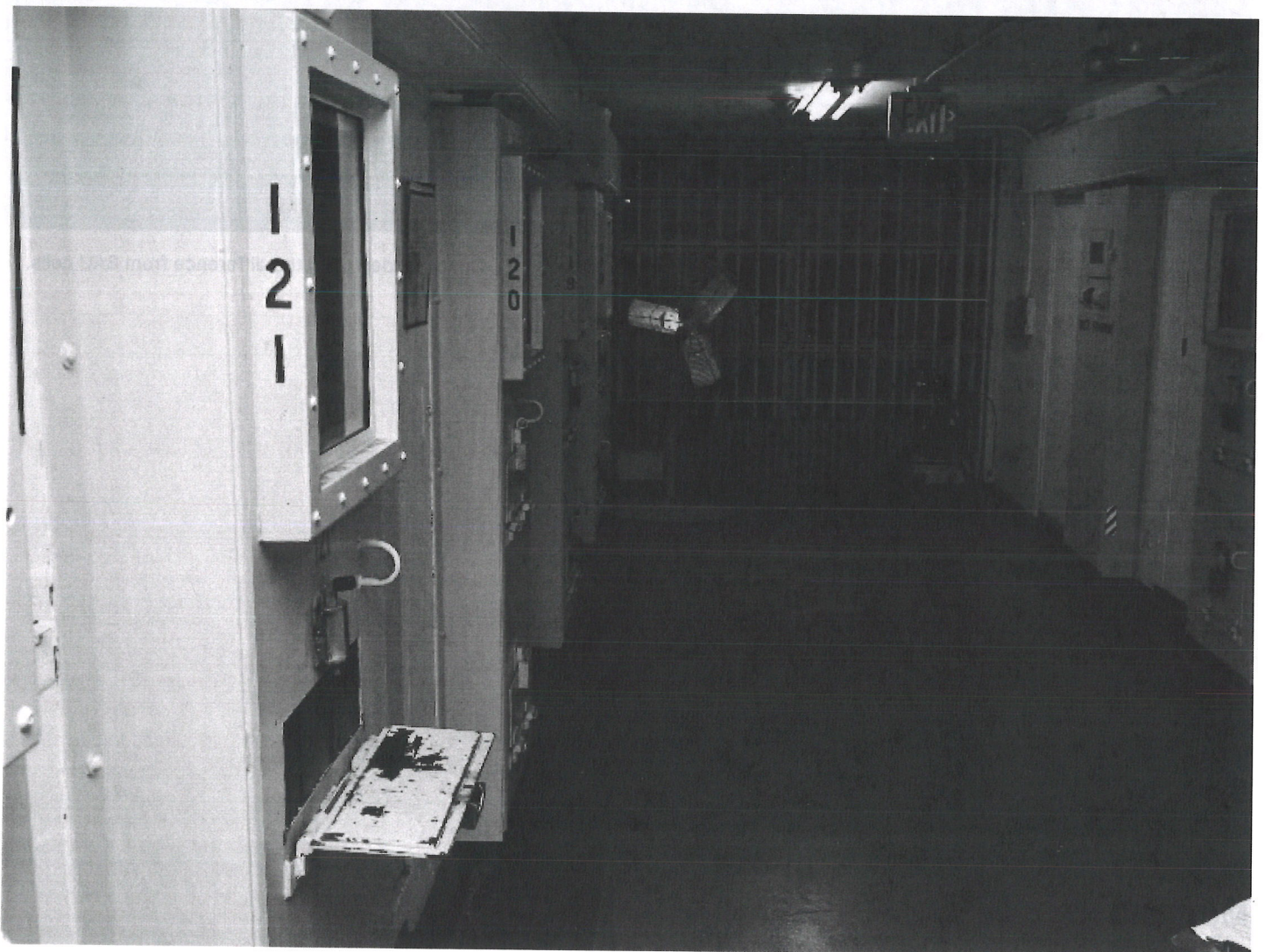
Several current and formerly incarcerated individuals told MassLive and The Republican there is very little mental health care offered in BAUs by VitalC strategies, the for-profit carceral health care company that is in the midst of a five-year, \$770 million contract with the DOC.

Most mental health contacts are conducted through the small slot in a cell door, the men said.

The independent audit by Barboza echoed those findings: most documented mental health contacts in BAUs lasted under five minutes, with some recorded as less than one minute. Her report confirmed care was often delivered through the door slot, and she described the BAU environment as “non-therapeutic.”

Current and formerly incarcerated people described conditions in the BAU that promote desperation and can push people further into mental distress.

“[T]he BAU starts to take control of your mind,” Peter Bousleiman, a man in his 20s, told his attorneys after spending four months in the unit. He is a named plaintiff in the ongoing class action lawsuit over BAUs filed by the Boston College Law School Civil Rights Clinic, Holland & Knight LLP and Prisoners’ Legal Services.



Investigative photos obtained from the Norfolk County District Attorney's Office show the cell door window and food slot inside the BAU at MCI-Norfolk. A correctional mental health expert found that most mental health care was delivered through the slot. (Norfolk County District Attorney/Mass. State Police)

During Kierft Noel's time at Souza-Baranowski, he estimates he was sent to the BAU more than 10 times on disciplinary grounds. He is suing the DOC in federal court over one of the stays in 2024.

In his lawsuit, where he is representing himself, Noel contends he wasn't allowed visitation, access to his personal items, schooling or church services. He argues the BAU was restrictive housing despite the 2018 law, causing him to suffer "severe and extreme emotional and mental injuries."

"It's very detrimental to somebody's mental state, on somebody's spirit," Noel, who has since been transferred to MCI-Norfolk, said in an interview.

In her report to the DOC, Barboza issued a blunt warning: while the agency has specifically defined BAUs as "not restrictive housing," that doesn't mean they function differently.

"The experience for individuals transferring into the BAU may be the same as being placed in restrictive housing, thus resulting in increased risk for suicide that is often seen in these settings," she wrote.

In response to Barboza's report, **the DOC announced in March it would enact a slew of changes** relative to BAUs, including updated definitions, risk assessments, increased time with clinicians and improved continuum of care for individuals admitted to the units.

Last month, the DOC said all medical and mental health clinicians across its facilities **now have dedicated tablets** for real-time access to health records — a suicide prevention measure, in that all staff have the same mental and behavioral health information, particularly meaningful for assessing risk if someone is transferred into a segregated housing unit.

Despite opposition from advocates, Jenkins remains steadfast in his stance that BAUs do not resemble restrictive housing or solitary confinement.

"I would push back on any kind of assertion or advocacy that it's the old RHU (restrictive housing unit)," he said.

To date, in 2026, there has been one death the DOC expects will be ruled a suicide by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, the agency said.

*"Death Under Watch" is an ongoing series by MassLive and The Republican investigating deaths in Massachusetts prisons and jails.*

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