

No. _____

In the Supreme Court of the United States

JOHN E. WETZEL, IN HIS PERSONAL CAPACITY, AND
LAUREL R. HARRY, IN HER OFFICIAL CAPACITY AS
PENNSYLVANIA'S SECRETARY OF CORRECTIONS,
Petitioners

v.

ROY LEE WILLIAMS,

Respondent

ON PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE
UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE THIRD CIRCUIT

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTION PRESENTED

For thirty-seven years, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) maintained a policy of housing all death-row inmates, including those with mental illnesses, in solitary confinement. The Court of Appeals upheld the constitutionality of this policy in 1988. And no precedent from either this Court or the Court of Appeals clearly established that the policy violated the United States Constitution during the relevant time period. Pet. App. 107a-114a (Phipps, J., dissenting in part). Nonetheless, a divided three-judge panel held that former DOC Secretary John Wetzel was not entitled to qualified immunity for continuing the purportedly unconstitutional policy. In holding that the law was clearly established, the Court of Appeals relied on a letter from two Department of Justice (DOJ) officials expressing their views about the policy's constitutionality. Pet. App. 26a-40a (opinion).

The question presented is:

Was it clearly established for qualified immunity purposes that long-term solitary confinement for a death-row inmate with a mental illness violated the Eighth Amendment?

PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDING

The petitioners (who were defendants and appellees below) are former Secretary of Corrections John E. Wetzel, in his personal capacity, and current Secretary of Corrections Laurel R. Harry, in her official capacity.

The respondent (who was the plaintiff and appellant below) is Roy Lee Williams.

RELATED PROCEEDINGS

United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania:

Williams v. Wetzel, No. 2:21-cv-01248-ER (Judgment entered on July 21, 2022)

United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit:

Williams v. Secretary Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, No. 22-2399 (Judgment entered on September 20, 2024; Petition for rehearing denied on December 9, 2024)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
QUESTION PRESENTED	i
PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDING.....	ii
RELATED PROCEEDINGS.....	ii
TABLE OF AUTHORITIES	v
OPINIONS BELOW.....	1
STATEMENT OF JURISDICTION	1
CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS INVOLVED.....	1
INTRODUCTION	2
STATEMENT OF THE CASE.....	3
REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION	8
 I. THE COURT SHOULD CLARIFY THAT ONLY THE JUDICIARY CAN CLEARLY ESTABLISH THE LAW FOR QUALIFIED IMMUNITY PURPOSES.	 8
 II. NONE OF THE JUDICIAL DECISIONS CITED BY THE COURT OF APPEALS CLEARLY ESTABLISHED THE ASSERTED EIGHTH AMENDMENT RIGHT DURING THE RELEVANT TIME PERIOD.	 14
 III. THE QUESTION PRESENTED IS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT.....	 18
 IV. THIS CASE IS AN IDEAL CANDIDATE FOR SUMMARY REVERSAL.....	 21
CONCLUSION.....	23

APPENDIX

Appendix A. Court of Appeals panel majority opinion and dissent (Sep. 20, 2024).....	1a
Appendix B. District Court opinion (July 21, 2022).....	116a
Appendix C. District Court order (July 21, 2022).....	141a
Appendix D. District Court judgment (July 21, 2022).....	142a
Appendix E. Court of Appeals order denying en banc review (Dec. 9, 2024)	143a

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

Cases

<i>Ashcroft v. al-Kidd</i> , 563 U.S. 731 (2011).....	2, 14, 15
<i>Bank Markazi v. Peterson</i> , 578 U.S. 212 (2016).....	9
<i>Bell v. Pa. Dep’t of Corrections</i> , 2:22-cv-01516 (W.D. Pa.)	19
<i>Boumediene v. Bush</i> , 553 U.S. 723 (2008).....	10
<i>Brosseau v. Haugen</i> , 543 U.S. 194 (2004) (<i>per curiam</i>)	17, 18
<i>Carroll v. Carman</i> , 574 U.S. 13 (2014) (<i>per curiam</i>)	8, 21
<i>City & County of San Francisco, Calif. v. Sheehan</i> , 575 U.S. 600 (2015).....	2, 10
<i>City of Escondido v. Emmons</i> , 586 U.S. 38 (2019) (<i>per curiam</i>)	21
<i>City of Tahlequah v. Bond</i> , 595 U.S. 9 (2021) (<i>per curiam</i>)	14, 21
<i>Clark v. Coupe</i> , 55 F.4th 167 (3d Cir. 2022).....	17
<i>District of Columbia v. Wesby</i> , 583 U.S. 48 (2018).....	15
<i>Farmer v. Brennan</i> , 511 U.S. 825 (1994).....	17, 18
<i>Garcia v. San Antonio Metro. Transit Auth.</i> , 469 U.S. 528 (1985).....	11
<i>Hope v. Pelzer</i> , 536 U.S. 730 (2002).....	7, 12, 13
<i>Kisela v. Hughes</i> , 584 U.S. 100 (2018) (<i>per curiam</i>)	15, 19, 21, 22
<i>Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo</i> , 603 U.S. 369 (2024).....	9

<i>Marbury v. Madison</i> , 1 Cranch 137 (1803).....	10
<i>Medellín v. Texas</i> , 552 U.S. 491 (2008).....	9
<i>Mullenix v. Luna</i> , 577 U.S. 7 (2015) (<i>per curiam</i>)	15, 21, 22
<i>Palakovic v. Wetzel</i> , 854 F.3d 209 (3d Cir. 2017)	16
<i>Parkell v. Danberg</i> , 833 F.3d 313 (3d Cir. 2016).	13
<i>Peterkin v. Jeffes</i> , 855 F.2d 1021 (3d Cir. 1988)	3, 4, 13, 17, 19
<i>Plumhoff v. Rickard</i> , 572 U.S. 765 (2014).....	17
<i>Porter v. Clark</i> , 923 F.3d 348 (4th Cir. 2019).....	16
<i>Porter v. Pennsylvania Dep’t of Corrections</i> , 974 F.3d 431 (3d Cir. 2020)	5, 13, 16
<i>Preiser v. Rodriguez</i> , 411 U.S. 475 (1973).....	11
<i>Rivas-Villegas v. Cortesluna</i> , 595 U.S. 1 (2021) (<i>per curiam</i>)	18
<i>Taylor v. Barkes</i> , 575 U.S. 822 (2015) (<i>per curiam</i>)	21
<i>Taylor v. Riojas</i> , 592 U.S. 7 (2020) (<i>per curiam</i>)	15
<i>United States v. Nixon</i> , 418 U.S. 683 (1974).....	10
<i>Walker v. Harry</i> , 2:24-cv-02295 (E.D. Pa.)	19
<i>White v. Pauly</i> , 580 U.S. 73 (2017) (<i>per curiam</i>)	2, 15, 21
<i>Williams v. Taylor</i> , 529 U.S. 362 (2000) (plurality opinion).....	9
<i>Wood v. Strickland</i> , 420 U.S. 308 (1975).....	8

<i>Wyatt v. Cole</i> , 504 U.S. 158 (1992)	11
<i>Young v. Quinlan</i> , 960 F.2d 351 (3d Cir. 1992)	15

Constitutional Provisions

U.S. CONST., AMEND. VIII	1
U.S. CONST., AMEND. XIV, § 1	1

Statutes

28 U.S.C. § 1254	1
42 U.S.C. § 1983	8
42 U.S.C. §§ 12131 <i>et seq.</i>	6

Rules

SUPREME COURT RULE 10	10
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OPINIONS BELOW

The opinion of the Court of Appeals, along with the partial dissent, is reported at 117 F.4th 503 and is reproduced in the appendix at 1a-115a. The decision of the District Court is reproduced in the appendix at 116a-140a.

STATEMENT OF JURISDICTION

The judgment of the Court of Appeals was entered on September 20, 2024. The Court of Appeals denied rehearing *en banc* on December 9, 2024. On February 20, 2025, Justice Alito extended the time to file a petition for a writ of certiorari to April 8, 2025. The jurisdiction of this Court is invoked under 28 U.S.C. § 1254(1).

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS INVOLVED

Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

U.S. CONST., AMEND. VIII.

No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

U.S. CONST., AMEND. XIV, § 1.

INTRODUCTION

This Court has repeatedly stressed the importance of qualified immunity “to society as a whole.” *White v. Pauly*, 580 U.S. 73, 79 (2017) (*per curiam*) (quoting *City & County of San Francisco, Calif. v. Sheehan*, 575 U.S. 600, 611 n.3 (2015)). The doctrine ensures that government officials who perform inordinately-difficult tasks—like running prisons and policing our streets—are given appropriate “breathing room to make reasonable but mistaken judgments about open legal questions.” *Ashcroft v. al-Kidd*, 563 U.S. 731, 743 (2011).

Properly applied, qualified immunity “protects all but the plainly incompetent or those who knowingly violate the law.” *al-Kidd*, 563 U.S. at 743 (cleaned up). Thus, to defeat a claim of qualified immunity, a plaintiff faces a steep climb and must demonstrate that the official violated a right that was “clearly established” at the time of the challenged conduct, placing the statutory or constitutional question “beyond debate.” *Id.* at 735, 741. And because only a court can “say what the law is,” whether a particular right has been “clearly established” turns on whether it was articulated in prior *judicial decisions*. *Sheehan*, 575 U.S. at 615-617.

Unable to root its holding in controlling precedent from a *court*, the majority below instead relied on a *letter* from two DOJ officials expressing concerns about the DOC’s policy. Pet. App. 26a-40a (Phipps, J., dissenting in part). In so ruling, the Court of Appeals upended the law of qualified immunity for officials in three states. For Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware, the law is “clearly established” for qualified immunity purposes when federal executive branch officials express an opinion on an open legal question. That untenable approach threatens separation of powers and federalism, cannot be administered consistently,

and is impossible to square with this Court’s qualified immunity precedents.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

1. In November 1982, the DOC decided that all Pennsylvania inmates sentenced to death would be confined in a Restricted Housing Unit (RHU) in one of three maximum security correctional institutions. Pursuant to that policy, death-row inmates were typically confined to their cells for twenty-two hours per day and prohibited from interacting with other prisoners.

2. In *Peterkin v. Jeffes*, 855 F.2d 1021, 1032 (3d Cir. 1988), the Third Circuit held that those conditions of confinement did not violate the Eighth Amendment. Although the Third Circuit acknowledged that some of Pennsylvania’s death-row inmates were psychologically disturbed, it nonetheless affirmed the district court’s determination that “the emotional and psychological condition of the inmates” was not “attributable to prison conditions other than the circumstance of living under a sentence of death.” *Id.* at 1030. Those “psychological disturbances” simply did not demonstrate the existence of an Eighth Amendment violation. *Ibid.* And anticipating that the length of time that inmates would spend on death row would continue to increase “because of the deliberate pace of post-conviction review afforded death-sentenced prisoners” and the “political factors surrounding the decision to carry out an execution,” the Third Circuit specifically stated that the time inmates spent on death-row was not a “factor” under the Eighth Amendment. *Id.* at 1029.

3. Respondent Roy Lee Williams was convicted of murder and sentenced to death in 1992—just a few years after *Peterkin* was decided. Pet. App. 117a. Pursuant to the standard procedures used by the DOC, Mr.

Williams was confined in a Capital Case Housing Unit, which housed death-row inmates under conditions of confinement that were not materially different from those found to be constitutional in *Peterkin*. Pet. App. 119a.

In July 1996, Mr. Williams purported to attempt suicide. He later told prison officials, however, that he had merely faked that attempt in order to get out of his cell to make a telephone call. Pet. App. 119a-120a. From that point forward, Mr. Williams consistently refused mental health treatment and insisted that he was fine. Pet. App. 120a.

4. When John Wetzel became the Secretary of Corrections in 2011, he initially continued the existing DOC policies requiring death-row inmates to be housed under the same conditions that had been approved in *Peterkin*—what the Court of Appeals described as “solitary confinement.”

The phrase “solitary confinement” is often used as shorthand to describe very different types of restricted housing. Here, Mr. Williams was housed in the Capital Case Housing Unit at the State Correctional Institution at Greene (SCI-Greene) during the relevant time period. Pet. App. 117a. Before 2018, inmates housed in this unit were permitted to engage in outdoor exercise activities, for as long as two hours, five days per week. 3d Cir. Dkt. ECF No. 19 at 123 (SCI-Greene Superintendent’s declaration). During each session, inmates exercised in outdoor enclosures that kept them separated from one another. *Ibid*. They were also kept in separate enclosures when they visited SCI-Greene’s law library. *Id.* at 124. Death-row inmates received all of their meals in their cells. *Ibid*.

Beginning in 2018, the DOC loosened the restrictions on death-row inmates. Death-row inmates were permitted to engage in outdoor exercise activities

seven days per week, instead of only five. 3d Cir. Dkt. ECF No. 19 at 123 (SCI-Greene Superintendent’s declaration). Inmates from the same pod were permitted to exercise together. *Ibid.* Inmates could spend at least one hour in the dayroom each day to socialize, play games, and watch television. *Ibid.* And inmates received their meals outside of their cells. *Ibid.*

On December 3, 2019, partially in response to a class-action lawsuit, the DOC established new procedures for housing death-row inmates that provided even more opportunities to socialize. Pet. App. 121a-122a. Mr. Williams conceded that his claims are limited to only the period of time *before* December 2019. Pet App. 121a.¹

5. In *Porter v. Pennsylvania Dep’t of Corrections*, 974 F.3d 431, 451 (3d Cir. 2020), the Third Circuit announced—for the first time—that “prolonged solitary confinement satisfie[d] the objective prong of the Eighth Amendment test” in cases involving death-row inmates. There, the inmate had been housed on death row since 1986, *see id.* at 435—just a few years *longer* than Mr. Williams. Critically, because a death-row inmate’s qualified right to avoid prolonged solitary confinement had not been clearly established before this 2020 decision, the Third Circuit held that prison officials (including Secretary Wetzel) were shielded by qualified immunity. *Porter*, 974 F.3d at 450-451.

¹ “Q. * * * Is your—are your complaints limited to the time before December 2019 when the Capital Case Unit was—you know, some of the restrictions were lifted? Or are you complaining about the current restrictions on the Capital Case Unit, as well?”

A. No. It’s not complaining about the current restrictions. It’s from—my initial enter into the Department of Corrections in 1993 until December 3, 2019.”

3d Cir. Dkt. ECF No. 19 at 66-68 (Williams Deposition at 11-13).

6. Mr. Williams commenced this civil action alleging violations of his Eighth Amendment rights.² The District Court recognized that the Third Circuit had held in *Porter* “that in a case where a death row inmate challenged the conditions of his solitary confinement under the Eighth Amendment, DOC officers were entitled to qualified immunity.” Pet. App. 136a. As Mr. Williams raised substantially the same cause of action as the inmate in *Porter*, Secretary Wetzel was entitled to qualified immunity on the Eighth Amendment claim. *Ibid.* The District Court therefore granted him summary judgment. Pet. App. 140a.³

7. On appeal, the Third Circuit vacated the District Court’s judgment granting Secretary Wetzel summary judgment on the Eighth Amendment claim. Pet. App. 50a. Even though Mr. Williams was removed from solitary confinement in December 2019—nine months before the Third Circuit’s ruling in *Porter*—the Court of Appeals held that Secretary Wetzel did not enjoy qualified immunity.

For the first time, the Third Circuit declared that *any* prisoner with a known history of mental illness—including a death-row inmate—had “a clearly-established right not to be subjected to prolonged, indefinite

² Mr. Williams also raised claims under the Fourteenth Amendment and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), 42 U.S.C. §§ 12131 *et seq.*

³ The District Court also dismissed Mr. Williams’ freestanding Fourteenth Amendment claim and granted the DOC summary judgment with respect to his ADA claim. Pet. App. 123a, 137a-140a. Those claims are not at issue here.

solitary confinement” without a “penological justification” that was separate and distinct from the nature of his or her sentence. Pet. App. 36a.⁴

In determining that Secretary Wetzel was not entitled to qualified immunity with respect to the Eighth Amendment claim—despite its prior decision in *Porter* shielding him from liability for similar claims accruing before September 2020—the Third Circuit relied on a 2014 letter from the DOJ Civil Rights Division addressed to the Pennsylvania Governor, copying Secretary Wetzel and other Pennsylvania officials. Pet. App. 26a-31a; Pet. App. 51a-106a (DOJ letter). In that letter, the DOJ opined that the use of solitary confinement to house death-row inmates violated their constitutional rights. Pet. App. 52a. The letter was an invitation to negotiate a different state policy for housing death-row inmates, stating: “We look forward to collaborating with [Secretary Wetzel] in the coming months to fashion an agreement between the United States and the Commonwealth that effectively addresses our shared concerns.” Pet. App. 53a.

The Third Circuit concluded that the DOJ letter placed Secretary Wetzel on notice that, as of 2014, it was “clearly established” that the Eighth Amendment prohibited him from continuing to house mentally ill death-row inmates in solitary confinement. Pet. App. 26a-40a. The majority below compared its reliance on the DOJ letter to this Court’s citation of a DOJ report in *Hope v. Pelzer*, 536 U.S. 730 (2002). Pet. App. 39a-

⁴ The Third Circuit also held that Mr. Williams’ Title II claim could proceed because of an alleged “factual dispute” as to whether the DOC had “failed to make modifications or accommodations to [his] conditions of confinement” while knowing that he had a serious mental illness. Pet. App. 47a-48a. Again, that claim is not at issue here.

40a. The majority appended the letter to its precedential opinion. Pet. App. 51a-106a.

In a partial dissent, Judge Phipps observed that the majority failed to identify any prior judicial decision holding that mentally-ill death-row inmates could not be housed in solitary confinement on a long-term basis. Pet. App. 110a (Phipps, J., dissenting in part). He also decried the majority’s improper reliance on the DOJ letter—instead of prior judicial decisions—to determine what was (or was not) “clearly established” for purposes of qualified immunity. Pet. App. 111a-114a (Phipps, J., dissenting in part).

The DOC defendants filed a petition for rehearing. The Third Circuit denied that petition on December 9, 2024. On February 20, 2025, Justice Alito extended the time for filing a certiorari petition to April 8, 2025.

REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION

I. THE COURT SHOULD CLARIFY THAT ONLY THE JUDICIARY CAN CLEARLY ESTABLISH THE LAW FOR QUALIFIED IMMUNITY PURPOSES.

“A government official sued under [42 U.S.C.] § 1983 is entitled to qualified immunity unless the official violated a statutory or constitutional right that was clearly established at the time of the challenged conduct.” *Carroll v. Carman*, 574 U.S. 13, 16 (2014) (*per curiam*). Since *Wood v. Strickland*, 420 U.S. 308, 322 (1975), competent, law-abiding state officials seeking to act “in good faith” looked solely to the courts to understand what constituted “clearly established constitutional rights.” That was, until this case.

Now, Pennsylvania officials are bound by the constitutional declarations of federal agency officials—declarations that the judiciary has no opportunity to

review or correct. As Judge Phipps highlighted below, it was “plainly incorrect” for the majority to give “the constitutional interpretations of a federal agency * * * the force of judicial precedent[.]” Pet. App. 111a-112a (Phipps, J., dissenting in part).

The Third Circuit’s improper use of the DOJ letter threatens fundamental separation-of-powers principles. Even in areas where deference to executive decision-making is commonplace, executive declarations or communications cannot control the outcomes in judicial proceedings. *Medellín v. Texas*, 552 U.S. 491, 523-532 (2008). It follows *a fortiori* that such declarations or communications cannot be given controlling weight in determining the meaning of the Constitution, which constitutes a quintessentially judicial power exercised by federal courts. “At the core of this power is the federal courts’ independent responsibility—independent from its coequal branches in the Federal Government, and independent from the separate authority of the several States—to interpret federal law.” *Williams v. Taylor*, 529 U.S. 362, 378-379 (2000) (plurality opinion). The judicial power cannot be ceded to—or exercised by—other governmental entities. *Bank Markazi v. Peterson*, 578 U.S. 212, 225-226 (2016).

Just last year, this Court observed that “the Framers structured the Constitution to allow judges to exercise th[eir] judgment independent of influence from the political branches.” *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo*, 603 U.S. 369, 385 (2024). Yet, in this case, the Court of Appeals effectively treated the DOJ letter in the same way that it would treat one of its own *en banc* decisions—or a decision of this Court—reversing or overruling a precedential decision shielding Secretary Wetzell from suit. That is not permissible. Indeed, it goes against a foundational pillar of our constitutional framework.

For over two centuries, it has been “emphatically the province and duty of the judicial department to say what the law is.” *Marbury v. Madison*, 1 Cranch 137, 177 (1803). The judicial power vested in Article III courts “can no more be shared with the Executive Branch than the Chief Executive, for example, can share with the Judiciary the veto power, or the Congress share with the Judiciary the power to override a Presidential veto.” *United States v. Nixon*, 418 U.S. 683, 704 (1974).

Because only a court can “say what the law is” (rather than what it ought to be), the question as to whether a particular right is “clearly established” turns on whether it has been articulated in prior judicial decisions. *Sheehan*, 575 U.S. at 615-617. “And qualified immunity, which depends on fair notice at the time of the alleged violation of a federal right, looks to judicial opinions—not letters from federal agencies—as the sources for such notice.” Pet. App. 111a (Phipps, J., dissenting in part).

The Third Circuit’s use of the DOJ letter to effectively displace its own precedent in determining the content of “clearly established” law “has so far departed from the accepted and usual course of judicial proceedings * * * as to call for an exercise of this Court’s supervisory power[.]” SUPREME COURT RULE 10(a). If left uncorrected, the Third Circuit’s decision will create “a striking anomaly in our tripartite system of government, leading to a regime in which [executive officials], not this Court [or other federal courts], say ‘what the law is’” for purposes of qualified immunity. *Boumediene v. Bush*, 553 U.S. 723, 765 (2008) (quoting *Marbury*, 1 Cranch at 177).

The Court of Appeals’ ruling also raises obvious federalism concerns, as it makes state officials subservi-

ent to the dictates of DOJ attorneys in areas traditionally reserved to the States, such as the operation and security of state prisons. *See Preiser v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 475, 491–92 (1973) (“It is difficult to imagine an activity in which a State has a stronger interest, or one that is more intricately bound up with state laws, regulations, and procedures, than the administration of its prisons.”). “The essence of our federal system is that within the realm of authority left open to them under the Constitution, the States must be equally free to engage in any activity that their citizens choose for the common weal * * *.” *Garcia v. San Antonio Metro. Transit Auth.*, 469 U.S. 528, 546 (1985). Our federal system is undercut if state prison officials are coerced to follow the legal opinions of DOJ attorneys out of fear that they might lose the qualified immunity defense.

Confronted by Judge Phipps’ admonishment, the majority attempts to explain away its error by legitimizing its reliance on the DOJ letter as proof of “personal notice” to Secretary Wetzel of binding judicial decisions. Pet. App. 38a-39a. This excuse holds no water.

This Court has never held that a plaintiff must prove that a state official was actually notified of relevant caselaw to defeat qualified immunity. *See Wyatt v. Cole*, 504 U.S. 158, 165-166 (1992) (describing the “wholly objective standard” applicable to qualified immunity while recognizing that it had no subjective element). And if the DOJ letter’s import was simply notice, the document would have deserved only passing reference. Instead, the majority spent numerous pages analyzing the letter, Pet. App. 26a-31a, and appended the full correspondence to its precedential opinion, Pet. App. 51a-106a. As Judge Phipps observed, the majority improperly “uses the 2014 Letter to set a date certain on which a constitutional right was clearly established

– the date of the 2014 Letter.” Pet. App. 113a. The majority’s attempt to suggest otherwise is at war with its own analysis.

The Court of Appeals purported to rely on *Hope v. Pelzer*, 536 U.S. 730 (2002), to justify its reliance on the DOJ letter to determine the content of “clearly established” law. Pet. App. 27a-29a. But that decision provides no support for what the Court of Appeals did here.

In *Hope*, this Court held that qualified immunity did not shield Alabama prison guards from Eighth Amendment claims brought by a prisoner who had been handcuffed to a hitching post without a shirt and exposed to the sun for long periods of time without water. *Hope*, 536 U.S. at 733-746. That decision was premised on a determination that the actions of the prison guards had contravened binding Eleventh Circuit precedent, a regulation promulgated by the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC), *and* “a DOJ report informing the ADOC of the constitutional infirmity in its use of the hitching post[.]” *Id.* at 741-742.

The DOJ report referenced in *Hope* was not used as a substitute for binding judicial precedent. In fact, by observing that there was “nothing in the record indicating that the DOJ’s views [had been] communicated to” the prison guards, this Court premised its decision on the state of existing *judicial precedent* (of which the prison guards had constructive notice) rather than on anything contained in the report (which they may not have even received or read). *Id.* at 745. Thus, this Court used the DOJ report in *Hope* to illustrate that the challenged practice had *always* been cruel and unusual under the Eighth Amendment. *Ibid.*

In contrast, the Third Circuit used the DOJ’s 2014 letter to establish when Secretary Wetzel should have realized that the Eighth Amendment’s standards had

changed or evolved. Pet. App. 26a-40a. As Judge Phipps pointed out in dissent, *Hope*’s rule permitting a DOJ report to buttress a conclusion that a state official should have been on notice that his or her conduct was (always and obviously) unconstitutional “does not apply” to “conduct that becomes viewed as cruel and unusual by virtue of evolving standards of decency[.]” Pet. App. 114a (Phipps, J., dissenting in part).

When Secretary Wetzel began his duties in 2011, he simply continued the longstanding DOC policy requiring death-row inmates to be housed in solitary confinement—the same policy that the Court of Appeals upheld in 1988. *Peterkin*, 855 F.2d at 1022-1033. And because of this, when the Court of Appeals announced *for the first time* that “prolonged solitary confinement satisf[ies] the objective prong” of a death-row inmate’s Eighth Amendment claim, that court correctly concluded that Secretary Wetzel was entitled to qualified immunity for claims accruing before the date of its opinion (September 1, 2020). *Porter*, 974 F.3d at 450-451.⁵ That prior qualified immunity determination was clearly correct: Secretary Wetzel was not “plainly incompetent” for continuing the 32-year-old DOC policy, supported by *Peterkin*, when he took office.

Finding no refuge in its own caselaw, the Court of Appeals was forced to improperly rely on the DOJ letter to establish what its own decisions had not—that, as of 2014, Secretary Wetzel should have somehow

⁵ Under Third Circuit precedent, a high-ranking prison official can be held personally liable for establishing or maintaining a policy, practice, or custom that inflicts a constitutional harm upon a prisoner. *Parkell v. Danberg*, 833 F.3d 313, 330-332 (3d Cir. 2016). In light of the holding in *Porter*, 974 F.3d at 451, the DOC defendants did not specifically argue that Williams’ Eighth Amendment claim failed on the merits (aside from the issue of qualified immunity).

known that the DOC’s policy had become unconstitutional. As Judge Phipps explained, the majority impermissibly used the letter “to set a date certain on which a constitutional right was clearly established” despite the fact that the alleged right had never before been recognized in a decision rendered by either this Court or the Third Circuit. Pet. App. 113a (Phipps, J., dissenting in part).

Given all of this, how on earth was Secretary Wetzel to know that the unconstitutionality of the DOC policy had become “beyond debate” in 2014? *al-Kidd*, 563 U.S. at 741. The answer is simple—there was no way of knowing. Secretary Wetzel was not “plainly incompetent,” *id.* at 743, in failing to predict the Third Circuit’s “new rule of constitutional law[.]” Pet. App. 107a (Phipps, J. dissenting in part). Qualified immunity exists to protect law-abiding officials like Secretary Wetzel in precisely this type of situation.

* * *

By erroneously outsourcing its Article III powers to two executive branch officials, the Court of Appeals upended qualified immunity jurisprudence for state officials in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. This Court frequently grants certiorari to summarily reverse decisions rendered in defiance of its qualified immunity jurisprudence. *See, e.g., City of Tahlequah v. Bond*, 595 U.S. 9, 12-14 (2021) (*per curiam*). It should do so here.

II. NONE OF THE JUDICIAL DECISIONS CITED BY THE COURT OF APPEALS CLEARLY ESTABLISHED THE ASSERTED EIGHTH AMENDMENT RIGHT DURING THE RELEVANT TIME PERIOD.

State officials like Secretary Wetzel enjoy qualified immunity unless they violated “clearly established

statutory or constitutional rights of which a reasonable person would have known.” *Kisela v. Hughes*, 584 U.S. 100, 104 (2018) (*per curiam*) (quoting *White*, 580 U.S. at 78-79). A right is clearly established when it is “sufficiently clear that every reasonable official would have understood that what he is doing violates that right.” *Mullenix v. Luna*, 577 U.S. 7, 11 (2015) (*per curiam*) (citation omitted). “In other words, existing law must have placed the constitutionality of the officer’s conduct ‘beyond debate.’” *District of Columbia v. Wesby*, 583 U.S. 48, 63 (2018) (quoting *al-Kidd*, 563 U.S. at 741). “This demanding standard protects all but the plainly incompetent or those who knowingly violate the law.” *Ibid.* (cleaned up); *see also al-Kidd*, 563 U.S. at 743. Secretary Wetzel deserves neither label here. He cannot be held liable for failing to presage Third Circuit rulings. And no judicial decision clearly established the purported Eighth Amendment right at issue here.

In *Young v. Quinlan*, 960 F.2d 351, 354-355, 363-365 (3d Cir. 1992), the Third Circuit held that a prisoner had raised a genuine issue of material fact concerning the constitutionality of his conditions of confinement by claiming that he had been placed in a “dry cell” (*i.e.*, a cell with no toilet and no running water) for four days as a punishment for deliberately clogging a toilet and flooding his cell. But the prisoner in *Young* maintained that he had been denied opportunities to leave the dry cell to urinate and defecate, and that prison officials had refused to give him toilet paper, drinking water, and water to wash his hands before eating. *Young*, 960 F.2d at 363. That decision merely stands for the unremarkable holding that the Eighth Amendment prohibits prison officials from housing prisoners in unsanitary conditions. *See e.g. Taylor v. Riojas*, 592 U.S. 7, 8-9 (2020) (*per curiam*). Mr. Williams makes no such allegations here.

Moreover, unlike Mr. Williams, the inmate in *Young* was not on death row. Before its decision in this case and even after Mr. Williams was released from solitary confinement in December 2019, the Third Circuit continued to distinguish cases challenging the conditions experienced by death-row inmates from cases challenging the “solitary confinement” of prisoners who had never been sentenced to death. *Porter*, 974 F.3d at 450.

Palakovic v. Wetzel, 854 F.3d 209, 215 (3d Cir. 2017), involved a mentally ill inmate who committed suicide after being repeatedly placed in solitary confinement. The Third Circuit determined that the prisoner’s parents had stated actionable Eighth Amendment claims against prison officials by alleging that those officials had repeatedly placed the prisoner in solitary confinement even though they knew about “the devastating mental health consequences caused by long-term isolation” and the inmate’s mental illness. *Palakovic*, 854 F.3d at 225-226. Like the inmate in *Young*, however, the inmate in *Palakovic* was not on death row. Recognizing the importance of this distinction from a qualified immunity perspective, the Third Circuit in *Porter* specifically declared the death-row inmate’s reliance on *Palakovic* to be “unavailing” precisely because the inmate in that case had not been on death row. *Porter*, 974 F.3d at 450.⁶

⁶ When the Third Circuit decided *Porter*, only the Fourth Circuit had previously held that the conditions experienced by death-row inmates housed in solitary confinement could satisfy the objective prong of an Eighth Amendment claim. *Porter v. Clark*, 923 F.3d 348, 355-361 (4th Cir. 2019). As the Third Circuit correctly recognized, that “single out-of-circuit case” was plainly “insufficient to clearly establish” an Eighth Amendment right allegedly possessed by death-row inmates residing in other parts of the country. *Porter*, 974 F.3d at 451.

In *Clark v. Coupe*, 55 F.4th 167, 182 (3d Cir. 2022), the Third Circuit held that, by 2016, an inmate who was “known to be seriously mentally ill” had a “clearly established” Eighth Amendment right “to not be placed in solitary confinement for an extended period of time by prison officials who were aware of * * * the risk of lasting harm posed by such conditions.” Of course, the 2022 decision in *Clark*, which also involved an inmate who was not on death row, is irrelevant to whether Secretary Wetzel was on notice of the Eighth Amendment’s requirements before December 2019. See *Plumhoff v. Rickard*, 572 U.S. 765, 779-780 (2014). Decisions postdating the relevant period of time “could not have given fair notice to [Secretary Wetzel] and are of no use in the clearly established inquiry.” *Brosseau v. Haugen*, 543 U.S. 194, 200, n. 4 (2004) (*per curiam*). And even if the earlier decisions cited in *Clark* supported its holding that most inmates with known mental illnesses had an Eighth Amendment right to avoid being housed in solitary confinement for extended periods of time, the Third Circuit’s 1988 decision in *Peterkin* clearly provided Secretary Wetzel with valid reasons to believe that the general principles articulated in those decisions did not apply with equal force—or did not apply at all—to inmates on death row. *Peterkin*, 855 F.2d at 1023-1033.

The Third Circuit’s citation to *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. 825 (1994), also provides no support for its decision. Pet. App. 38a, n. 147. Although *Farmer* established the general principle that “a prison official may be held liable under the Eighth Amendment for denying humane conditions of confinement” if he or she subjectively “knows that inmates face a substantial risk of serious harm and disregards that risk[,]” that decision had nothing to do with death-row inmates or solitary

confinement. *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 847. Instead, it involved an inmate who sued prison officials for failing to prevent a sexual assault that had been perpetrated by another inmate. *Id.* at 830. To the extent the Third Circuit based its decision on *Farmer*, it improperly disregarded this Court’s admonition that the “inquiry” as to whether a particular official is entitled to qualified immunity “must be undertaken in light of the specific context of the case, not as a broad general proposition.” *Rivas-Villegas v. Cortesluna*, 595 U.S. 1, 5-6 (2021) (*per curiam*) (quoting *Brosseau*, 543 U.S. at 198).

As Judge Phipps recognized, “[u]nder that tapestry of precedent, the right as articulated by the Majority Opinion was not clearly established between 2014 and 2019 when Mr. Williams was in solitary confinement.” Pet. App. 111a (Phipps, J., dissenting in part). And because a DOJ letter does not, and cannot, clearly establish the law, Secretary Wetzel was plainly entitled to qualified immunity. Pet. App. 115a (Phipps, J., dissenting in part).

III. THE QUESTION PRESENTED IS CRITICALLY IMPORTANT.

In Judge Phipps’ words, the majority below committed a “grievous error offensive to basic principles of separation of powers[.]” Pet. App. 111a (Phipps, J., dissenting in part). While the undermining of our constitutional structure is itself important enough to warrant this Court’s review, the gravity of the Third Circuit’s grievous error extends far beyond this case.

Mr. Williams was not the only death-row inmate held in solitary confinement prior to 2019. Currently, 52 other inmates have, collectively, 27 cases pending in district courts against Secretary Wetzel on this precise claim. By “misus[ing] the 2014 Letter in its efforts to

defeat qualified immunity[.]” the Court of Appeals improperly exposes Secretary Wetzel to liability in all of these cases.

The Third Circuit’s erroneous ruling extends well beyond these two-dozen cases. Additional inmates have begun using the DOJ letter in class action lawsuits against other correctional officials.⁷ The Third Circuit’s “big mistake[.]” *see* Pet. App.112a (Phipps, J., dissenting in part), could result in punishing Secretary Wetzel and other prison officials—to the tune of millions upon millions of dollars in public funds—because they correctly did not view a federal agency letter as clearly establishing the law. These cases could significantly impact the DOC’s resources and, by natural extension, inhibit Pennsylvania’s ability to manage its prisons.

Furthermore, the Third Circuit’s “big mistake” cannot be cabined to just prison cases. Hundreds of Pennsylvania officials have—prior to this decision—operated under the reasonable belief that, so long as they do not violate clearly established law *as articulated by a court*, they are protected by qualified immunity. That shield has been shattered. State officials, police officers, and prison guards must now take into account all constitutional musings of the Executive Branch. That is neither fair nor workable.

Troublingly, in this case the Court of Appeals permitted a letter by an Acting Assistant Attorney General and a United States Attorney to override *that court’s own precedent*. *See Peterkin*, 855 F.2d at 1032. If such a thing is even remotely permissible, the fair notice component of qualified immunity is erased. *See Kisela*, 584 U.S. at 104. How can average police officers

⁷ *Walker v. Harry*, 1:25-cv-00050 (M.D. Pa.), dkt. 1 (complaint at ¶¶ 50-52); *Bell v. Pa. Dep’t of Corrections*, 2:22-cv-01516 (W.D. Pa.), dkt 75 (second amended complaint at ¶ 50).

or prison guards reasonably be expected to know that their conduct is unlawful if the constitutional interpretations of a federal agency can override judicial decisions? The answer is again obvious; they cannot.

Difficult unanswered questions arise from this ruling.

- Which letters by a federal agency clearly establish the law?
- Must the letter be from an agency head to clearly establish the law, or may the letter be from agency staff?
- Do letters from the DOJ possess a unique authority to clearly establish the law, or can any federal agency put state officials on notice of new constitutional interpretations?
- What should a state official do if a federal agency issues one opinion and then, under a new administration, issues a conflicting opinion?
- Would a letter from the DOJ *endorsing* a state policy carry any qualified immunity significance?
- Can a letter from an advocacy group interpreting the Constitution defeat qualified immunity?

These obvious questions demonstrate how the Third Circuit's novel restructuring of qualified immunity is unmoored from this Court's caselaw. If this decision is permitted to stand, it is unclear how state and municipal employees can know whether their conduct is constitutional. Qualified immunity becomes a gamble, rather than a safety net.

Finally, and perhaps most troubling, letters from federal agencies are not generally reviewable by this Court. Should a court of appeals misinterpret a constitutional provision, this Court may, in its discretion, correct that error. If the DOJ sends a letter to a Penn-

sylvania official misinterpreting a constitutional provision, that letter cannot be appealed to this Court. To whom should state officials appeal an unfavorable DOJ letter?

The Court of Appeals’ ruling that a federal executive-branch letter can “set a date certain on which a constitutional right was clearly established[.]” Pet. App. 113a, is clearly unworkable. It is already causing confusion among Pennsylvania officials. And courts within the Third Circuit will undoubtedly struggle to reconcile the Court of Appeals’ inchoate approach with this Court’s jurisprudence.

The Court of Appeals’ holding offends our constitutional structure. This critically important case warrants the Court’s review.

IV. THIS CASE IS AN IDEAL CANDIDATE FOR SUMMARY REVERSAL.

This Court often summarily reverses where, as here, the court of appeals egregiously misapplied the qualified immunity standard. *See, e.g., Carroll v. Carman*, 574 U.S. 13, 17-20 (2014) (*per curiam*); *Mullenix v. Luna*, 577 U.S. 7 (2015) (*per curiam*); *White v. Pauly*, 580 U.S. 73 (2017) (*per curiam*); *Kisela v. Hughes*, 584 U.S. 100 (2018) (*per curiam*); *City of Escondido v. Emons*, 586 U.S. 38, 43 (2019) (*per curiam*); *City of Tahlequah v. Bond*, 595 U.S. 9, 10-14 (2021) (*per curiam*). That practice has also been employed in the Eighth Amendment context. *See, e.g., Taylor v. Barkes*, 575 U.S. 822, 825 (2015) (*per curiam*) (summarily reversing where the right to adequate prison suicide prevention protocols was not clearly established). This case, too, presents an ideal opportunity for summary reversal.

The decisions cited by the Third Circuit to support the unprecedented rule announced in this case “are simply too factually distinct to speak clearly to the specific circumstances here.” *Mullenix*, 577 U.S. at 18. Under *Peterkin*, Secretary Wetzel had every reason to believe that it was constitutional to house all death-row inmates in solitary confinement. *Peterkin*, 855 F.2d at 1022-1033. And he was not required to anticipate or predict what the Court of Appeals would later announce in *Porter* or in this case. *Kisela*, 584 U.S. at 107 (explaining that “a reasonable officer is not required to foresee judicial decisions that do not yet exist”).

Because the Court of Appeals disregarded both fundamental separation-of-powers principles and this Court’s prior decisions involving a state official’s entitlement to qualified immunity, this Court should grant Secretary Wetzel’s certiorari petition and summarily reverse the Third Circuit’s decision denying him qualified immunity with respect to Mr. Williams’ Eighth Amendment claim.

CONCLUSION

The Court should grant the petition and summarily reverse the Court of Appeals' decision holding that qualified immunity does not shield Secretary Wetzel from Mr. Williams' Eighth Amendment claim. Alternatively, the Court should grant the petition, exercise plenary review, and resolve the question presented.

Respectfully submitted,

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APPENDIX

Appendix A. Court of Appeals panel majority opinion and dissent (Sep. 20, 2024)	1a
Appendix B. District Court opinion (July 21, 2022)	116a
Appendix C. District Court order (July 21, 2022)	141a
Appendix D. District Court judgment (July 21, 2022)	142a
Appendix E. Court of Appeals order denying en banc review (Dec. 9, 2024)	143a

APPENDIX A

PRECEDENTIAL

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE THIRD CIRCUIT

No. 22-2399

ROY L. WILLIAMS,
Appellant

v.

SECRETARY PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF
CORRECTIONS

On Appeal from the United States District Court
for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania
(D.C. No. 2:21-cv-01248)
District Judge: Honorable Eduardo C. Robreno

Argued on July 14, 2023

Before: PHIPPS, MONTGOMERY-REEVES and
McKEE,
Circuit Judges.

(Opinion filed: September 20, 2024)

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OPINION OF THE COURT

McKEE, *Circuit Judge*

Roy Lee Williams, a death-row prisoner with a history of mental illness, was held in solitary confinement on the Capital Case Unit (CCU) of a Pennsylvania state correctional institution for twenty-six years. Williams filed this action alleging that, given his known history of serious mental illness, being continuously held in solitary confinement for twenty-six years without penological justification violated the Eighth Amendment's cruel and unusual punishment clause and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The District Court granted summary judgment for Defendants. It held that Secretary John E. Wetzel, the former Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of

Corrections (DOC), was entitled to qualified immunity on the Eighth Amendment claim and that Williams could not show that the DOC was deliberately indifferent under the ADA.¹ Williams now appeals the District Court's grant of Defendants' motion for summary judgment on both claims.

Prior to the District Court's summary judgment decision, on April 1, 2021, the District Court sua sponte dismissed Williams' Fourteenth Amendment claim, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(b)(ii), for failure to state a claim. Williams also appeals that decision.

Our review of the District Court's decision requires us to draw all reasonable inferences in Williams' favor, including that the Secretary had knowledge of Williams' preexisting serious mental illness. We must then determine if the Secretary should have known that holding this death-row prisoner with preexisting serious mental illness in solitary confinement from 1993 to 2019 without penological justification violated the Eighth Amendment.

We conclude that the Secretary had "fair and clear warning" that his conduct was unconstitutional and should have known that keeping Williams in solitary confinement would constitute cruel and

¹ Since Plaintiff filed suit, George Little has replaced Secretary Wetzel as the acting Secretary of Corrections. Accordingly, the Court has deemed Plaintiff's ADA claim to be against George Little in his official capacity as the Secretary of Corrections. For purposes of this opinion, we refer to Secretary Wetzel and George Little as "the Secretary" throughout.

unusual punishment.² Therefore, the doctrine of qualified immunity does not shield the Secretary from Williams' Eighth Amendment claim. Our prior precedents and the record before us leave no room for doubt that it has long been clearly established that someone with a known preexisting serious mental illness has a constitutional right not to be held—without penological justification—in prolonged solitary confinement.

As to Williams' Title II ADA claim, the District Court correctly determined that there was a material factual dispute as to whether the DOC knew that Williams had a serious mental illness.³ However, the court erroneously concluded that a trier of fact could not find that the DOC was deliberately indifferent to the risk of harm it caused by placing and keeping Williams in solitary confinement despite his preexisting serious mental illness. Accordingly, we will vacate the District Court's grant of summary judgment on both claims and remand for further proceedings. We will affirm the District Court's dismissal of Williams' Fourteenth Amendment claim.

I. Factual Background

Roy Lee Williams was held on death row in solitary confinement in the CCU from 1993 to 2019—twenty-six years. Astonishingly, he was only subject to an active death warrant for thirty-seven days of those twenty-six years.⁴

² *United States v. Lanier*, 520 U.S. 259, 271 (1997).

³ J.A. 012, 035.

⁴ Williams' death warrant is no longer active. His first death warrant was signed on October 11, 1995. His execution was scheduled for October 26, 1995, and stayed on October 20, 1995.

Williams' Mental Health History

Williams' history of serious mental health issues dates back to childhood. In 1979, when Williams was fourteen, he was involuntarily committed to the Philadelphia Psychiatric Center for making suicidal threats and exhibiting violent behavior.⁵ There, he was diagnosed with depression and suicidal ideation.⁶

In 1994, while in custody at SCI-Graterford, Williams sought help from the Psychological Services Department because he was deteriorating emotionally.⁷ A psychiatrist diagnosed him with a psychiatric disability and placed him on the DOC's Mental Health Roster, with a "C" designation.⁸ At some

His second death warrant was signed on February 2, 1996. His execution was scheduled for February 20, 1996, and stayed on February 12, 1996. His third death warrant was signed on December 20, 2004. His execution was scheduled for February 17, 2005, and stayed on January 7, 2005.

⁵ J.A. 108; 110–11.

⁶ Three to six months after his discharge, Williams voluntarily returned to the Philadelphia Psychiatric Center for ninety additional days of inpatient treatment. He participated in family therapy sessions for roughly one year after his second hospitalization.

⁷ He informed a psychologist that he had a history of suicidal ideation and that he had been involuntarily committed to the Philadelphia Psychiatric Center as a teenager.

⁸ The DOC scores the mental health of incarcerated people "on a four-point nominal scale system." J.A. 205. People on the "A" Roster have "no identified psychiatric/[intellectual disability] needs or history of psychiatric treatment." *Id.* People on the "B" Roster have an "identified history of psychiatric treatment, but no current need for psychiatric treatment; [these individuals are] placed on inactive [mental health]/[intellectual disability] roster." *Id.* People on the "C" Roster are "currently receiving psychiatric treatment, but [are] not currently diagnosed with a [serious mental illness] or functional impairment and do[] not have an

point during his incarceration, he was downgraded to the “B” Roster.⁹

On December 30, 1995, Williams was referred to a psychiatrist at SCI-Graterford due to manifestations of “depression and anxiety.”¹⁰ During an evaluation performed on January 29, 1996, Williams described his psychiatric history of visits to the Philadelphia Psychiatric Center as a young teenager.¹¹ Mental health staff found that he “[p]resented no mental decompensation or emotional problems.”¹²

However, in 1996, in support of Williams’ Post Conviction Relief Act (PCRA) petition, Dr. Barry Crown, a psychologist and neuropsychologist, and Dr. Robert Fox, a psychiatrist, evaluated Williams and shared their conclusions with his criminal defense attorneys who, in turn, shared them with the DOC.¹³ Both doctors provided information about Williams’ traumatic childhood and his struggles with mental illness, including his psychiatric hospitalization. Dr.

[intellectual disability] or [are] not [guilty but mentally ill]. *Id.* Finally, the “D” Roster is for people who are “currently diagnosed with a [serious mental illness], [intellectual disability], credible functional impairment, or [are] [guilty but mentally ill].” *Id.*

⁹ J.A. 121.

¹⁰ J.A. 294.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ The DOC notes that “those declarations were not mentioned in the summary of Williams’ medical records that had been drafted during a review completed by attorneys working for the Capital Habeas Unit of the Federal Community Defender Office for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania.” Appellee Br. 25 n.5. The District Court determined, however, that there was an issue of fact as to whether these declarations were provided to the prison’s mental health staff. *Williams v. Wetzel*, No. 21-1248, 2022 WL 2869316, at *9 (E.D. Pa. July 21, 2022).

Crown documented Williams' brain damage and the resulting "impairments and deficiencies" that neuropsychological testing had revealed.¹⁴ These included "impaired cognition," "emotional lability," and deficiencies in "reasoning capacity."¹⁵ The evaluation confirmed, in his opinion, that Williams was "severely psychologically, cognitively and emotionally impaired."¹⁶ Similarly, Dr. Fox described Williams as having "ingrained psychological and emotional impairments," including symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and "depression."¹⁷ Williams asserts that copies of the doctors' declarations were provided to the DOC mental health staff.¹⁸

On July 3, 1996, during his period of incarceration at SCI-Graterford, Williams attempted to commit suicide by "ma[king] a noose out of a sheet."¹⁹ In the period leading up to this suicide attempt, Williams told correctional officers that he heard "voices telling him to kill himself."²⁰ Because of the suicide attempt, Williams was placed in a psychiatric observation cell for two or three days. The cell is "like an isolation cell where they take all your clothes."²¹ While confined there, Williams was offered Prozac, which he declined. Williams later told his attending physician and the other mental health professionals that he was "faking" the suicide attempt and had attempted suicide "to get to another [housing] unit[,] to make a phone call[,] just to get out [of] the cell."²² When subsequently deposed, however, Williams swore that

¹⁴ J.A. 51–52.

¹⁵ J.A. 52–53.

¹⁶ J.A. 55.

¹⁷ J.A. 56.

¹⁸ The Secretary argues that even if it had been provided with the doctors' declarations, these declarations "could not have placed

he had in fact attempted suicide, and only told mental health staff that he had been “faking” the attempt in order to get out of the psychiatric observation cell.²³

Following this incident, DOC officials removed Williams from the psychiatric observation cell and placed him in disciplinary custody for roughly six months. As a result of his custody status, his property—including his tv and radio—were removed from his cell, and he visited the yard alone. Williams describes disciplinary status as being “isolated on top of being isolated.”²⁴ After being placed in disciplinary custody, Williams did not have further contact with the Mental Health Department.²⁵

B. Confinement on Death Row

Although the Secretary argues that Williams’ placement in solitary confinement was required under Section 4303 of Pennsylvania’s Prison and Parole

Secretary Wetzel . . . on notice that Williams was mentally ill” because the experts’ opinions were rejected during subsequent PCRA proceedings. Appellee Br. 25–26 (citing *Commonwealth v. Williams*, 846 A.2d 105, 110–11, 113 (Pa. 2004)). However, there is no evidence in the record that the DOC was aware of the subsequent PCRA proceedings, and thus nothing to suggest that the determinations in the PCRA proceedings would have altered the DOC’s assessment of whether Williams had a preexisting mental illness.

¹⁹ J.A. 114.

²⁰ J.A. 294.

²¹ J.A. 113–14.

²² J.A. 114.

²³ J.A. 114.

²⁴ J.A. 115–16.

²⁵ This is with the exception that on August 8, 2002, his psychiatric records indicate that he “seem[ed] worried and anxious.” J.A. 294.

Code,²⁶ that statute was not enacted until five years *after* Williams was placed in solitary confinement.²⁷ Williams was placed in solitary initially pursuant to the DOC's internal policy.²⁸ Section 4303 thereafter mandated that upon receipt of a death warrant, "the secretary [of corrections] shall, until infliction of the death penalty . . . keep the [incarcerated person] in solitary confinement."²⁹ However, where, as here, an inmate's death warrant expired, it was "entirely a matter of the Department's discretion where to house an inmate."³⁰ Until November 2019, the DOC held individuals with expired death warrants in solitary confinement indefinitely. The DOC only abandoned that policy when it settled a class-action brought on behalf of CCU inmates alleging that their CCU conditions violated their Eighth and Fourteenth Amendment rights. The DOC began implementing changes pursuant to the settlement agreement in December 2019.

The conditions of death row solitary confinement have been well-documented by this Court. Before the

²⁶ See 61 Pa. Cons. Stat. § 101 (setting "Prisons and Parole Code" as the reference title for Title 61).

²⁷ In 1998, the Pennsylvania legislature passed Senate Bill 252 (Pr. No. 253), now known as Section 4303. Section 3 of the Act of June 18, 1998, Providing for a Procedure and Method of Execution; and Making Repeals, P.L. 80. Williams was placed in solitary confinement in 1993.

²⁸ In November 1982, the DOC began segregating individuals sentenced to death from the general population on its own accord—not pursuant to state statute. See *Peterkin v. Jeffes*, 661 F. Supp. 895, 902 (E.D. Pa. 1987), *aff'd in part and vacated in part*, 855 F.2d 1021 (3d Cir. 1988).

²⁹ 61 Pa.C.S. § 4303 (2009).

³⁰ *Porter v. Pa. Dep't of Corrs.*, 974 F.3d 431, 445 n.9 (3d Cir. 2020) (quoting *Clark v. Beard*, 918 A.2d 155, 160 (Pa. Commw. Ct. 2007)).

2019 settlement agreement, prisoners in the CCU lived in cells no larger than seven feet by twelve feet.³¹ They were forced to “spend[] the overwhelming majority of [their] time in [their] cell[s], including eating [their] meals alone.”³² They were not allowed to leave their cells for more than ten hours per week, including for basic hygiene and work duty and were only permitted to exercise in “cages . . . no more than twice the size of a typical CCU cell.”³³ When permitted to leave their cells, CCU prisoners were “handcuffed from behind, or handcuffed in front using a belt and tether” and they were forced to “undergo a visual strip search.”³⁴ Their “[j]ob assignments [we]re limited to janitorial duties on the CCU block, and performed in confined small spaces under close observation and monitoring.”³⁵ Prisoners in the CCU were “precluded from participation in adult basic education courses, vocational learning opportunities or the chance to work towards a high school diploma” and were not permitted to attend group religious services.³⁶

In 2014, the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) published a comprehensive report, in the form of a letter, following its investigation of the Pennsylvania DOC’s use of solitary confinement on individuals with serious mental illnesses, including individuals placed in the CCU.³⁷ In addition to facts we set forth in *Porter*,³⁸ the DOJ investigation found that

³¹ *Porter*, 974 F.3d at 436.

³² *Id.*

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

all individuals in solitary confinement had to spend almost their entire day confined to cells that are less than 100 square feet. Most cells lacked exterior windows, and therefore any natural light. Although the lighting inside the cell could be dimmed, it could “never be turned off, even at night,” and “the noise level c[ould] be high . . . because of yelling and banging of neighboring prisoners.”³⁹ The DOJ also found that “the air quality [wa]s often poor because of inadequate sanitation and ventilation[,]” which was of particular concern when individuals smeared feces on the wall; “it[] [was] often left like that for days and the entire pod [would] reek[] of shit and make[] you want to vomit.”⁴⁰

In addition to physical conditions, the DOJ reported on the DOC’s practices with respect to individuals with serious mental illness held in solitary confinement. The DOJ condemned the DOC’s punitive responses to prisoners exhibiting symptoms of mental illness, noting that the DOC “respond[s] to behaviors that signal mental illness not by seeking to ensure that the inmate received adequate mental health treatment, but instead by imposing additional restrictions on the conditions of the prisoners’ confinement.”⁴¹ This included “us[ing] housing assignments within the solitary confinement units as a way to punish prisoners for conduct related to their mental illness,” confining prisoners to their cells 24/7, denying them bedding material and/or running water,

³⁸ 974 F.3d at 436–37.

³⁹ J.A. 070.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ J.A. 071.

and taking away their clothes.⁴² The DOC also resorted to the unnecessary use of full-body restraints—often for more than seven hours at a time.

The DOJ found that the DOC’s subjection of prisoners with serious mental illness to prolonged periods of solitary confinement was often unjustifiably harsh and resulted in serious harm. The DOJ warned the Secretary that pursuant to Supreme Court precedent set forth in *Estelle v. Gamble*⁴³ and *Farmer v. Brennan*,⁴⁴ the DOC’s use of solitary confinement violated the Eighth Amendment.⁴⁵ Specifically, it informed the Secretary that the DOC’s use of solitary confinement for extended periods of time on individuals with serious mental illness “constitutes precisely the type of indifference to excessive risk of harm the Eighth Amendment prohibits.”⁴⁶ The DOJ’s analysis emphasized that individuals with serious mental illness suffer more during prolonged periods of solitary confinement than individuals who do not have this preexisting condition.⁴⁷ After referencing this Court’s pronouncement that “[t]he touchstone [of an

⁴² J.A. 071–72. Perhaps the most repugnant response to manifestations of individuals’ mental illness detailed in the report was one individual’s allegation that when he created a makeshift noose and “stood on his toilet preparing to kill himself, a group of officers encouraged him According to the prisoner, the officers told him that they ‘wanted to see his feet dangling,’ and chanted, ‘1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . kill yourself,’ repeatedly.” J.A. 072.

⁴³ 429 U.S. 97 (1976).

⁴⁴ 511 U.S. 825 (1994).

⁴⁵ J.A. 064–65 (first citing *Estelle*, 429 U.S. at 102; and then citing *Farmer*, 511 at 843).

⁴⁶ J.A. 065.

Eighth Amendment violation] is the health of the inmate,”⁴⁸ the DOJ found the manner in which the DOC used solitary confinement on prisoners with serious mental illness violated the Eighth Amendment because it: (1) resulted in serious “harm or an unreasonable risk of harm,” (2) interfered with the DOC’s “ability to provide adequate mental health treatment,” and (3) constituted “unjustifiably harsh” and “dehumanizing” conditions.⁴⁹

The DOJ reached a similar conclusion when considering the DOC’s use of solitary confinement under Title II of the ADA. Specifically, the DOJ found that the DOC’s practices violated Title II because the DOC: (1) unnecessarily segregated individuals with disabilities and failed to modify its policies and practices; (2) failed to individually assess individuals to determine whether placement in segregation was appropriate or justified; and (3) unnecessarily denied opportunities for individuals to engage in and benefit from programming.

⁴⁷ J.A. 070 (“[T]he particular use of solitary confinement on inmates with SMI in the PDOC system, when examined under the totality of the circumstances, includes unjustifiably harsh conditions, even though some of these conditions, standing alone, might not be inappropriate in other circumstances.”).

⁴⁸ J.A. 068 (quoting *Young v. Quinlan*, 960 F.2d 351, 364 (3d Cir. 1992)).

⁴⁹ J.A. 068–70 (emphasis omitted). At the outset of the report, the DOJ recognized that the DOC had begun reforming the way in which it uses solitary confinement on prisoners with serious mental illness but noted that despite “important improvements, much more work needs to be done to ensure sustained compliance with the mandates of the Constitution and the ADA.” J.A. 063.

II. Procedural Background

Williams filed a pro se complaint against the Secretary, asserting Eighth and Fourteenth Amendment claims under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, and a claim under Title II of the ADA. He requested nominal, compensatory, and punitive damages under the Eighth Amendment and the ADA based upon his continued placement in solitary confinement “in light of his history of depression and suicidal ideation.”⁵⁰

The District Court sua sponte dismissed Williams’ Fourteenth Amendment claim pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii).⁵¹

Thereafter, Defendants filed a motion for summary judgment, which the District Court granted.⁵² The District Court determined that, pursuant to *Porter v. Pennsylvania Department of Corrections*,⁵³ the Secretary was entitled to qualified immunity on Williams’ Eighth Amendment claim. The District Court also granted summary judgment on

⁵⁰ J.A. 009–10.

⁵¹ The District Court also sua sponte dismissed Williams’ official capacity claim under §1983 and his individual capacity claim under Title II of the ADA. It determined that Williams’ official capacity claim under § 1983 was barred by the Eleventh Amendment but allowed Williams’ claim against Secretary Wetzel in his individual capacity to proceed. The District Court also held that because Title II of the ADA prohibits only a “public entity” from discriminating against people with disabilities, Williams’ official-capacity ADA claim was tantamount to a claim against the DOC.

⁵² Prior to this motion, the District Court permitted the defendants to depose Williams, but did not allow for other discovery.

⁵³ 974 F.3d at 431.

Williams' ADA claim. It determined that, although there was a factual dispute as to whether Williams had a disability under the ADA, he could not establish the intentional discrimination necessary to obtain compensatory damages.

III. Jurisdiction and Standard of Review

We have jurisdiction over Williams' appeal under 28 U.S.C. § 1291, and we conduct plenary review of the grant of summary judgment.⁵⁴ Summary judgment should be granted only where the record shows that "there is no genuine dispute as to any material fact and the movant is entitled to judgment as a matter of law."⁵⁵ We draw all reasonable inferences in the non-movant's favor.⁵⁶

IV. Discussion

Williams argues that the Secretary was not entitled to qualified immunity from Williams' Eighth Amendment allegations. He contends that the Secretary should have known that continuing to hold someone with his mental and medical history in solitary confinement violated a clearly established right. Defendants, on the other hand, dispute whether the Secretary had adequate notice to defeat the shield of qualified immunity, as well as whether the Secretary

⁵⁴ See *Williams v. Sec. Pa. Dep't of Corrs.* ("*Williams I*"), 848 F.3d 549, 557 (3d Cir. 2017).

⁵⁵ Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(a).

⁵⁶ *Williams I*, 848 F.3d at 557.

knew of Williams’ mental problems.⁵⁷ Williams further argues that the District Court erred in granting summary judgment on his ADA claim. Finally, Williams argues that the District Court erred when, pursuant to § 1915(e)(2)(b)(ii), it sua sponte dismissed with prejudice his Fourteenth Amendment claim for failure to state a claim. We will address these arguments in turn.

A. Eighth Amendment Claim

Williams claims that the Secretary forced him to languish in solitary confinement, despite knowledge of his preexisting serious mental frailty, in deliberate indifference to his health and safety, in violation of his Eighth Amendment rights.⁵⁸ In response, the Secretary only argues that he is entitled to qualified immunity because Williams’ right was not clearly established.

⁵⁷ At summary judgment, we view the facts in the light most favorable to Williams. *Brooks v. Kyler*, 204 F.3d 102, 105 n.5 (3d Cir. 2000). Accordingly, on this record, we must assume that Williams had a preexisting serious mental illness when placed in solitary confinement and notified the DOC of his preexisting serious mental illness.

⁵⁸ To prove deliberate indifference under the Eighth Amendment, a plaintiff must establish that “(1) he had a serious medical need, (2) the defendants were deliberately indifferent to that need; and (3) the deliberate indifference caused harm to the plaintiff.” *See Durham v. Kelley*, 82 F.4th 217, 229 (3d Cir. 2023) (describing what a litigant must plead at the motion to dismiss phase). A prison official is deliberately indifferent pursuant to the Eighth Amendment if the official knows an incarcerated person faces “a substantial risk of serious harm and disregards that risk by failing to take reasonable measures to abate it.” *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 847.

The Secretary does not dispute that Williams’ Eighth Amendment right to be free from cruel and unusual punishment was violated.⁵⁹ Accordingly, that argument is forfeited.⁶⁰

1. Qualified Immunity

“Under the doctrine of qualified immunity, ‘officials performing discretionary functions generally are shielded from liability for civil damages insofar as their conduct does not violate clearly established statutory or constitutional rights.’”⁶¹ To determine whether a government official is entitled to qualified immunity, we must ask whether (1) the facts put forward by the plaintiff show a violation of a constitutional right and whether (2) the right was clearly established at the time of the alleged misconduct.⁶² We need not “tackle these steps in sequential order.”⁶³ Because the Secretary does not dispute that Williams’ Eighth Amendment right was violated, we need only consider

⁵⁹ He would have been hard-pressed to make such an argument, given that Porter recognized that “prolonged solitary confinement . . . poses a substantial risk of serious psychological and physical harm.” 974 F.3d at 441–43.

⁶⁰ See *Barna v. Board of School Directors of Panther Valley School District*, 877 F.3d 136, 146 (3d Cir. 2017) (“[F]orfeiture is the failure to make the timely assertion of a right,’ an example of which is an inadvertent failure to raise an argument.”) (quoting *United States v. Olano*, 507 U.S. 725, 733 (1993)).

⁶¹ *Williams I*, 848 F.3d at 557 (quoting *Harlow v. Fitzgerald*, 457 U.S. 800, 818 (1982)).

⁶² *Peroza-Benitez v. Smith*, 994 F.3d 157, 165 (3d Cir. 2021).

⁶³ *Williams I*, 848 F.3d at 557–58 (first citing *Pearson v. Callahan*, 555 U.S. 223, 234–36 (2009); and then citing *Werkheiser v. Pocono Twp.*, 780 F.3d 172, 176 (3d Cir. 2015)).

whether the right was clearly established at the relevant time.

To determine whether the right was clearly established, we examine the state of the relevant law when the violation allegedly occurred.⁶⁴ A right is clearly established where existing precedent has “placed the statutory or constitutional question beyond debate.”⁶⁵ “[G]eneral statements of the law are not inherently incapable of giving fair and clear warning”⁶⁶ Moreover, the facts in existing precedent “need not perfectly match” the circumstances of the case at hand.⁶⁷ The “ultimate question” in the qualified immunity analysis “is whether the defendant had fair warning that his conduct deprived his victim of a constitutional right.”⁶⁸ “[O]fficials can still be on notice that their conduct violates established law even in novel factual circumstances”⁶⁹ because “a general constitutional rule already identified in the decisional law may apply with obvious clarity to the specific conduct in question, even though ‘the very action in question has [not] previously been held unlawful.’”⁷⁰ Therefore, common sense may dictate that a constitutional violation has occurred where a constitutional violation is “so obvious” that a

⁶⁴ *Williams I*, 848 F.3d at 570.

⁶⁵ *Ashcroft v. al-Kidd*, 563 U.S. 731, 741 (2011) (first citing *Anderson v. Creighton*, 483 U.S. 635, 640 (1987); and then citing *Malley v. Briggs*, 475 U.S. 335, 341 (1986)).

⁶⁶ *Lanier*, 520 U.S. at 271.

⁶⁷ *Williams I*, 848 F.3d at 570.

⁶⁸ *Schneder v. Smith*, 653 F.3d 313, 329 (3d Cir. 2011) (quoting *Hope v. Pelzer*, 536 U.S. 730, 740 (2002) (internal quotation marks omitted)).

⁶⁹ *Hope*, 536 U.S. at 741.

⁷⁰ *Id.* (quoting *Lanier*, 520 U.S. at 270–71) (alteration in original).

government official has “fair warning” that the conduct is unconstitutional.⁷¹

Given the nearly infinite combination of factors that can underlie a given claim, requiring an exact factual match with prior decisions would be tantamount to morphing qualified immunity into absolute immunity because no plaintiff could ever identify a sufficiently identical precedent.⁷² We do not, therefore, limit our focus to whether we have previously decided cases with identical facts and circumstances. However, before we can turn to relevant caselaw, we must appropriately “frame the right”⁷³ that Williams alleges was violated, “with all reasonable inferences drawn in” his favor, as the nonmovant.⁷⁴ The Supreme Court has cautioned against framing the right at “a high level of generality.”⁷⁵ Instead, we must “define the right allegedly violated at the appropriate level of specificity”⁷⁶ to determine “whether the violative nature of *particular* conduct is clearly established.”⁷⁷ This inquiry should consider the specific context of the case, not simply a broad proposition.⁷⁸

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² See *Williams I*, 848 F.3d at 570 (“Requiring that precedent and subsequent disputes rest on identical facts would license state actors to violate constitutional rights with impunity simply by varying some irrelevant aspect of constitutional violations.”).

⁷³ *Peroza-Benitez*, 994 F.3d at 165.

⁷⁴ *Mack v. Yost*, 63 F.4th 211, 228 (3d Cir. 2023) (first citing *Peroza-Benitez*, 994 F.3d at 165–66; and then citing *Tolan v. Cotton*, 572 U.S. 650, 657 (2014)).

⁷⁵ *Ashcroft*, 563 U.S. at 742.

⁷⁶ *Sharp v. Johnson*, 669 F.3d 144, 159 (3d Cir. 2012) (citing *Williams v. Bitner*, 455 F.3d 186, 191 (3d Cir. 2006)).

⁷⁷ *Mullenix v. Luna*, 577 U.S. 7, 12 (2015) (per curiam) (quoting *Ashcroft*, 563 U.S. at 742).

⁷⁸ See *Peroza-Benitez*, 994 F.3d at 165.

The District Court appears to have defined the right at issue here as a death row prisoner's Eighth Amendment right not to be held in solitary confinement. It then determined that pursuant to our prior decision in *Porter*, Williams' alleged right had not been clearly established. However, in its analysis, the District Court failed to frame the right with the "appropriate level of specificity"⁷⁹ because it ignored the relevance of Williams' preexisting serious mental illness and the Secretary's knowledge of it, along with the lack of a penological justification for placing and continuing to hold Williams in solitary confinement. There is evidence in the record that Williams was diagnosed with depression and suicidal ideation before he began his twenty-six years in solitary confinement. There is also evidence that he told a DOC psychologist that he "had a history of suicidal ideation and [had been] involuntarily committed to [the] Philadelphia Psychiatric Center when [he] was 13 years old."⁸⁰ It is undisputed that, at some point during his incarceration, he was placed on the DOC's Mental Health Roster with a "C" designation, which is reserved for individuals requiring psychiatric treatment.⁸¹ Viewing the facts in the light most favorable to Williams, we also consider that declarations from Williams' doctors, documenting his childhood psychiatric hospitalization, "impaired cognition,"

⁷⁹ *Peroza-Benitez* 994 F.3d at 165 (quoting *Sharp*, 669 F.3d at 159).

⁸⁰ J.A. 252.

⁸¹ The DOC's classification of Williams's mental illness is a relevant—but not dispositive—factor when analyzing whether his mental illness was serious. And the record raises a genuine dispute of material fact about whether Williams had a known preexisting serious mental illness for the reasons provided above.

“emotional lability,” and deficiencies in “reasoning capacity,” were provided to the DOC.⁸²

Although the Secretary argues that the record does not support Williams’ assertion that the Secretary knew or should have known about his preexisting serious mental illness, the record does raise a genuine dispute of fact as to the DOC’s knowledge that Williams was seriously mentally ill. Where “issues of fact may preclude a definitive finding on the question of whether the plaintiff’s rights have been violated, the court must nonetheless decide whether the right at issue was clearly established.”⁸³ Therefore, we must decide whether the right of a death row prisoner, with a known preexisting serious mental illness not to be placed and held in prolonged solitary confinement—without penological justification—was clearly established at the relevant time. We hold that it was.

2. Individuals with a Known History of Serious Mental Illness Have a Clearly Established Right to Not Be Subjected to Prolonged Solitary Confinement Without Penological Justification

It is well established that prison officials may not act with “deliberate indifference” to a person’s health or safety,⁸⁴ and that we may infer the existence of this subjective state of mind from the fact that the risk of harm at issue is obvious, though ignored.⁸⁵ Further, this Court has long held that in assessing the

⁸² J.A. 52–53.

⁸³ *Spady v. Bethlehem Area Sch. Dist.*, 800 F.3d 633, 637 n.4 (3d Cir. 2015).

⁸⁴ *Hudson v. McMillian*, 503 U.S. 1, 8 (1992).

⁸⁵ *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 842.

conditions of segregated housing units, the “touchstone is the health of ... inmate[s],” including their mental health.⁸⁶ Undoubtedly, holding a prisoner with a known preexisting serious mental illness in solitary confinement for a protracted period without penological justification would result in “unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain.”⁸⁷ This violation is so obvious that the Supreme Court and Third Circuit cases gave respondents fair notice that this treatment of Williams was unlawful.

Our precedents leave no room for doubt that individuals with a known history of serious mental illness have a clearly established right not to be subjected to prolonged solitary confinement without penological justification, regardless of their sentence. In *Young*, one of the many cases the DOJ report relied upon, we held that the district court had erred by granting summary judgment to the defendants on Young’s Eighth Amendment claims because Young had raised a material dispute as to the conditions of his solitary confinement.⁸⁸ In so doing, we clarified that when evaluating Eighth Amendment allegations concerning segregated housing units, “[t]he touchstone is the health of the inmate.”⁸⁹ Further, we explained that “[t]he duration and conditions of segregated confinement cannot be ignored in deciding whether such confinement meets constitutional standards.”⁹⁰ Highly relevant to this analysis is that prisons may not

⁸⁶ *Young*, 960 F.2d at 364.

⁸⁷ *Whitley v. Albers*, 475 U.S. 312, 320 (1986).

⁸⁸ *Young*, 960 F.2d at 363–64.

⁸⁹ *Id.* at 364.

⁹⁰ *Id.* (first citing *Hutto v. Finney*, 437 U.S. 678, 686–87 (1978); and then citing *Smith v. Coughlin*, 748 F.2d 783, 787 (2d Cir. 1984)).

punish in a way that “threatens the physical and mental health of prisoners.”⁹¹ Indeed, after recognizing that segregated detention cannot be “foul, inhuman or totally without penological justification,”⁹² we explained that Young’s preexisting physical illness made his solitary confinement even more inhumane,⁹³ just as Williams’ preexisting mental illness did here.

We have recently explained that Young “recognized that determining the constitutionality of prison conditions is a heavily fact-specific inquiry, where the particular characteristics of the prisoner raising the challenge are taken into consideration.”⁹⁴ Relying on Supreme Court precedent, we held, in *Clark*, that someone with a known preexisting serious mental illness has a clearly established right since at least 2016 not to be held in prolonged solitary confinement.⁹⁵ There, the plaintiff’s allegations that “he was kept in conditions of almost complete isolation

⁹¹ *Id.* at 685–86 (“Courts . . . have universally condemned conditions of segregation inimicable [sic] to the inmate occupants’ physical health, and, in some instances, have also considered conditions that jeopardize the mental health or stability of the inmates so confined. . . . While the prison administration may punish, it may not do so in a manner that threatens the physical and mental health of prisoners.”).

⁹² *Id.*

⁹³ *Id.* at 365 (noting the fact that Young’s HIV-positive status made his unsanitary conditions “all the more revolting” because he was “more susceptible to infection and disease”).

⁹⁴ *Clark*, 55 F.4th at 179, 181–82, 184–85.

⁹⁵ *See id.* 97 854 F.3d 209 (3d Cir. 2017),

⁹⁸ *Clark*, 55 F.4th at 186–87 (citing *Ind. Pro. & Advoc. Servs. Comm’n v. Comm’r, Ind. Dep’t of Corr.*, No. 1:08-cv-01317- TWP-MJD, 2012 WL 6738517, at *23 (S.D. Ind. Dec. 31, 2012) (placing seriously mentally ill inmates in solitary confinement threatened permanent injury and violated the Eighth Amendment); *Jones “El v. Berge*, 164 F. Supp. 2d 1096, 1101–02 (W.D. Wis. 2001)

for seven months by officials who knew him to be seriously mentally ill” were sufficient to allege an Eighth Amendment violation.⁹⁶ In so holding, we drew from *Palakovic v. Wetzel*,⁹⁷ and a “robust consensus of [district court] decisions” holding unconstitutional the practice of “assigning mentally ill prisoners to solitary confinement.”⁹⁸ In reaching this conclusion, we noted that Clark had adequately alleged deliberate indifference because he claimed that, like in *Palakovic*, the DOC defendants knew he was seriously mentally ill and knew that placing him in solitary confinement would cause him severe harm.⁹⁹ In *Palakovic*, a plaintiff, “diagnosed with a number of serious mental

(granting injunctive relief where conditions of solitary confinement “can be devastating” to mentally ill individuals housed in supermax prison); *Madrid v. Gomez*, 889 F. Supp. 1146, 1265–66 (N.D. Cal. 1995) (concluding that mentally ill inmates “in the SHU is the mental equivalent of putting an asthmatic in a place with little air to breathe’ and therefore unconstitutional”); *Coleman v. Wilson*, 912 F. Supp. 1282, 1320–21 (E.D. Cal. 1995) (concluding that segregating inmates with serious mental disorders violates their Eighth Amendment rights); *Casey v. Lewis*, 834 F. Supp. 1477, 1549–50 (D. Ariz. 1993) (holding the practice of assigning seriously mentally ill inmates to segregated housing “despite their knowledge of the harm” constitutes an “appalling” Eighth Amendment violation); *Langley v. Coughlin*, 715 F. Supp. 522, 540 (S.D.N.Y. 1989) (holding viable claim that prison officials’ failure to “screen out” those inmates that “by virtue of their mental condition, are likely to be severely and adversely affected by placement there”)).

⁹⁹ *Clark*, 55 F.4th at 180–81.

disorders,”¹⁰⁰ committed suicide after he was repeatedly placed in solitary confinement for “multiple 30-day stints” during a thirteen month period.¹⁰¹ There, we held that allegations that “prison officials knew the conditions of confinement “were inhumane for [Palakovic] in light of his mental illness,”¹⁰² yet continued to subject him to severe isolation, were “more than sufficient” to state an Eighth Amendment claim.¹⁰³

We then determined in *Clark* that qualified immunity did not apply because “the right of a prisoner known to be seriously mentally ill to not be placed in solitary confinement for an extended period of time by prison officials who were aware of, but disregarded, the risk of lasting harm posed by such conditions,” was well established at the time of the violative conduct.¹⁰⁴ Even though *Clark* concerned violations that began in January 2016, we recognized that the constitutional right was “*long protected by Eighth Amendment jurisprudence*,”¹⁰⁵ including *Young*, *Farmer*, and *Hope*.¹⁰⁶ We determined that Third Circuit and Supreme Court precedent supported our conclusion that Clark’s right was clearly established, and found

¹⁰⁰ 854 F.3d at 216.

¹⁰¹ *Id.* at 217, 225.

¹⁰² *Clark*, 55 F.4th at 179 (quoting *Palakovic*, 854 F.3d at 225).

¹⁰³ *Palakovic*, 854 F.3d at 226. Because *Palakovic* did not consider qualified immunity, we had no occasion to determine whether the Eighth Amendment right was clearly established at the time of the violative conduct, which began in 2011, *id.*, and do not rely on this case in concluding that Williams’ right was clearly established as of at least 2014.

¹⁰⁴ *Clark*, 55 F.4th at 182.

¹⁰⁵ *Id.* at 181 (emphasis added).

¹⁰⁶ *Id.* at 183–85.

that the defendant had fair notice that he was violating Clark’s right in light of our precedents, prison policy, state statute, and a federal lawsuit that survived a motion to dismiss.¹⁰⁷ Here, we rely on much of the same law that we did in *Clark* and determine that the Secretary had fair notice that Williams’s conditions of confinement violated the Eighth Amendment because controlling precedent clearly established the right of a death row prisoner with a known preexisting serious mental illness not to be held in prolonged solitary confinement without penological justification.

This conclusion is easily buttressed by the comprehensive 2014 DOJ report, which—relying on *Farmer*, *Hope*, *Young*, and other binding precedent—warned the Secretary that the DOC’s practices of knowingly holding seriously mentally ill prisoners in solitary confinement for extended periods of time was cruel and unusual.¹⁰⁸ The DOJ concluded a months’ long investigation and determined that the DOC’s “use of a harsh form of solitary confinement for extended periods of time on hundreds of prisoners with [serious mental illness]/[intellectual disability] *constitutes precisely the type of indifference to excessive risk of harm the Eighth Amendment prohibits.*”¹⁰⁹ The DOJ then advised the DOC—and Secretary Wetzell specifically—of its findings, including its detailed analysis of how the DOC’s practices violated Supreme Court and Third Circuit precedent.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.* at 180–88.

¹⁰⁸ *Id.* at 180.

¹⁰⁹ J.A. 065 (emphasis added).

We have recognized that a variety of sources can be considered when evaluating whether officials received fair warning that their conduct was unlawful.¹¹⁰ The Supreme Court recognized in *Hope v. Pelzer* that DOJ reports like this one should not be ignored when determining whether officials had fair notice that they were violating clearly established law.¹¹¹ In *Hope*, the Supreme Court held that the DOJ's warning to the Alabama Department of Corrections that its practice of shackling individuals to a hitching post was unconstitutional supported the determination that it was clearly established that such practices violated the law.¹¹² Even though there was “nothing in the record indicating that the DOJ's [report was] communicated to [the individual defendants],” the Court nonetheless relied on it because other DOJ communications with the Alabama Department of Corrections “len[t] support to the view that reasonable officials in the ADOC should have realized” the alleged treatment violated the Eighth Amendment.¹¹³

The 1994 DOJ report in *Hope* was not nearly as authoritative and informative as the letter that the DOJ sent to the Secretary here. The 1994 DOJ report

¹¹⁰ *Clark v. Coupe*, 55 F.4th 167, 188 (3d Cir. 2022) (“Both Supreme Court and this Court’s precedents consider district court cases, prison regulations, and state statutes in determining whether officials received fair warning that their conduct was unreasonable.”).

¹¹¹ 536 U.S. at 744–46.

¹¹² *Id.* at 744.

¹¹³ *Id.* at 745.

stated that “[t]he hitching pole policy is inappropriate and violates constitutional standards.”¹¹⁴ In three paragraphs, it explained that the hitching pole “should never be used as punishment,” that the staff does not comply with its own policies regarding the hitching pole, and that the dehumanizing practice is “potentially dangerous.”¹¹⁵ However, unlike the DOJ report here, the 1994 report did not rely upon, nor cite to cases or external sources to support its conclusions.

In contrast, the 2014 DOJ report, which was twenty five-pages long and sent directly to the Secretary, was replete with citations to Supreme Court and Third Circuit cases, case studies, and statistics to support its conclusion that the DOC’s solitary confinement of individuals with serious mental illness violated the law. More than ten pages of the report analyzed and explained how the DOC’s specific practices violated the Eighth Amendment. In *Hope*, the DOJ’s conclusory constitutional determination buttressed the Court’s conclusion that the law was clearly established. The 2014 DOJ report serves the

¹¹⁴ U.S. Dep’t of Justice, Notice of Findings from Investigation of Easterling Correctional Facility (Alio, Alabama), inc. Review of Medical Care at Easterling Correctional Center June 1994 (Mar. 27, 1995) at 3, <https://clearinghouse.net/case/535/>. The DOJ also noted at the outset of the document that it found “significant constitutional violations in two major areas.” *Id.* at 1. It explained that “[i]n order to bring Easterling up to constitutional standards, [it] recommend[ed] implementation of . . . remedial measures,” including “[c]eas[ing] use of the ‘security bar’ or any other form of corporal punishment or improper restraint including, but not limited to: shackling inmates to fences, posts, rails, cell bars, or other stationary objects.” *Id.* at 4–5.

¹¹⁵ *Id.* at 3.

same function and provides the same notice as it did in *Hope*.¹¹⁶

Relying on *Hope*, the 2014 DOJ report explained precisely why the DOC's use of solitary confinement on prisoners with serious mental illness was unconstitutional under controlling precedent:

By subjecting prisoners with [serious mental illness ("SMI")] to prolonged periods of solitary confinement under harsh conditions that are not necessary for legitimate security-related reasons, [the DOC] exposes them to an excessive and obvious risk of serious harm. *See Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 828; *Hope v. Pelzer*, 536 U.S. 730, 738-745 (2002) (holding that prison officials show deliberate indifference where they disregard obvious risks to prisoner safety). Moreover, our expert-consultants observed that as a direct result of these practices, prisoners with SMI have suffered serious psychological and physical harms, including psychosis, trauma, severe depression, serious self injury, and suicide. *Cf Young v. Quinlan*, 960 F.2d 351, 364 (3d Cir. 1992) ("The touchstone is the health of the inmate. While the prison administration may punish, it must not do so in a manner that threatens the physical and mental health of prisoners.").¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ *Id.* at 745-46 ("Even if there might once have been a question regarding the constitutionality of this practice, the Eleventh Circuit precedent . . . as well as the DOJ report condemning the practice, put a reasonable officer on notice that the use of the hitching post under the circumstances alleged by *Hope* was unlawful.").

¹¹⁷ J.A. 068.

The DOJ went on to explain that the manner in which the [DOC] used solitary confinement posed an “excessive risk to the mental health of prisoners” and “violated the Eighth Amendment.”¹¹⁸ First, it specifically stated that “lengthy periods of solitary confinement involve[d] conditions that [the DOJ’s] expert-consultants found subjected prisoners to harm or an unreasonable risk of harm and contribute[d] to the Constitutional violation.”¹¹⁹ Undoubtedly, this included individuals like Williams, who had a history of serious mental illness and had nevertheless been held in solitary confinement for over twenty years. Second, the DOJ found that “the manner in which [DOC use[d] solitary confinement interfere[d] with its ability to provide adequate mental health treatment to prisoners with SMI and contribute[d] to the Constitutional violation.”¹²⁰ The Pennsylvania DOC’s use of solitary confinement likely also interfered with Williams’ treatment. This record supports the conclusion that Williams’ already-fragile mental health deteriorated to the point that he attempted suicide while held in solitary confinement. Although the Secretary notes that Williams was offered Prozac after his suicide attempt, the 2014 DOJ report makes clear that “[a]ppropriate mental health treatment for prisoners with SMI should involve much more than medication.”¹²¹ And third, citing the Supreme Court’s

¹¹⁸ *Id.* (citing *Peterkin v. Jeffes*, 855 F.2d 1021, 1024-25 (3d Cir, 1988)).

¹¹⁹ *Id.* (emphasis omitted).

¹²⁰ J.A. 069 (emphasis omitted).

¹²¹ J.A. 069.

decision in *Wilson v. Seiter*,¹²² the 2014 DOJ report recognized that “unjustifiably harsh conditions often attend[ed] [DOC]’s use of prolonged solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI. In combination, these conditions [we]re dehumanizing and cruel and contribute[d] to the Constitutional violation.”¹²³ It further explained how the DOC’s use of solitary confinement on prisoners with serious mental illness resulted in harm, noting, for example, that “*more than 70 percent* of documented suicide attempts between January 1, 2012 and May 31, 2013 occurred in solitary confinement units.”¹²⁴

The significance of the 2014 DOJ report simply cannot be ignored. The Secretary was directly informed that under *binding precedent*, placing someone with a known history of serious mental illness in solitary confinement for a prolonged period of time without penological justification clearly was unlawful.¹²⁵ We therefore conclude that the Secretary *personally* had fair warning by 2014—at the very latest—that Williams’s conditions of confinement clearly violated basic principles of Eighth Amendment established by controlling precedent.¹²⁶ And that personal notice

¹²² 501 U.S. 294, 304 (1991) (holding that conditions of confinement violate the Eighth Amendment when they combine to “have a mutually enforcing effect that produces the deprivation of a single, identifiable human need”).

¹²³ J.A. 070 (emphasis omitted).

¹²⁴ J.A. 064 (emphasis added).

¹²⁵ This notice is similar to that in *Clark*, in which we determined that a federal lawsuit surviving a motion to dismiss gave “prison officials . . . *direct notice* that their conduct regarding solitary confinement potentially violated the Eighth Amendment,” and supported our conclusion that Clark alleged the violation of a clearly established law. 55 F.4th at 186 (emphasis added).

buttresses our holding that a reasonable person in the Secretary's shoes would have known that it clearly violated basic principles of Eighth Amendment law established by controlling precedent—to hold a death row prisoner with a known history of serious mental illness in solitary confinement for a prolonged period of time without penological justification.

The Secretary argues that *Porter* forecloses this conclusion, but that argument fails. *Porter*, like *Clark* and *Palakovic*, also concerned prolonged solitary confinement, but it only concerned people of sound mind when first placed in solitary confinement. In *Porter*, we held that keeping a prisoner sentenced to death in solitary confinement for thirty-three years violated the Eighth Amendment, however, qualified immunity applied because “[w]e ha[d] not found Eighth Amendment cases with sufficiently similar fact patterns.”¹²⁷ Although *Palakovic* “certainly acknowledge[d] the dangers of solitary confinement,” we “distinguishe[d] *Palakovic* from *Porter*’s case” on the basis “that the plaintiff was not on death row *and had specific known mental health issues pre-assignment to solitary confinement*.”¹²⁸ Therefore, it was not yet clearly established that the Eighth Amendment prohibited placing a person *without a known preexisting serious mental illness* in prolonged

¹²⁶ In *Busanet v. Wetzel*, No. CV 21-4286, 2023 WL 5003573, at *10–14 (E.D. Pa. Aug. 4, 2023), the court—on similar facts—concluded that the right of an individual on death row with preexisting mental illness not to be held in prolonged solitary confinement was clearly established. We find Judge McHugh’s reasoning to be sound, and echo many of the same principles throughout this opinion.

¹²⁷ 974 F.3d at 450.

¹²⁸ *Id.* (emphasis added).

solitary confinement while on death row prior to our deciding *Porter* in 2020.¹²⁹

The Secretary argues that based on *Porter*, Williams’ sentence—and not his health—controls the analysis. *Porter* indeed recognized that the sentence an individual serves may be relevant, but the touchstone” of an Eighth Amendment analysis has long been, and remains, “the health of the inmate[.]”¹³⁰ not his sentence. Just as the known preexisting mental illness pre-assignment to solitary confinement was a distinguishing factor in *Porter*, it is a distinguishing factor here. As *Porter* recognized, this distinction is important. Our precedents have made clear that solitary confinement can “cause cognitive disturbances” after “even a few days”¹³¹ in a person without a preexisting mental illness; obviously, such prolonged confinement is particularly cruel for a person with “severely compromised mental health.”¹³² In other words, *Porter* certainly suggests that being on death row may be relevant to an Eighth Amendment analysis in some contexts. It is not possible, however, to read *Porter* as standing for the proposition that the Eighth Amendment rights for individuals with known preexisting serious mental illness turn on the nature of their sentences—a non-health related concern.

Next, the Secretary argues that respondents did not violate clearly established law because the DOC purportedly kept Williams in solitary confinement pursuant to an internal policy interpreting 61

¹²⁹ *See id.* at 450.

¹³⁰ *Young*, 960 F.2d at 364.

¹³¹ *Williams I*, 848 F.3d at 562 (citation omitted).

¹³² *Clark*, 55 F.4th at 181. (alterations in original).

Pennsylvania Consolidated Statute, Section 4303. In doing so, the Secretary gives tremendous weight to an internal DOC policy that is actually irrelevant. The Secretary begins by noting that Williams was initially placed in solitary confinement pursuant to Section 4303. That is simply wrong.¹³³ Williams was initially placed in solitary confinement in 1993, and Section 4303—directing placement in solitary confinement for death-row prisoners—did not go into effect until five years later.¹³⁴ In other words, although the DOC knew that Williams had a preexisting serious mental illness, Williams nevertheless languished in solitary confinement after the expiration of his death warrant, not because of Section 4303, but because of the DOC policy that remained in effect until 2019, when the DOC settled the Eighth Amendment and ADA claims brought against it.

According to the Secretary, he is entitled to qualified immunity because keeping Williams in solitary confinement for twenty-six years was “consistent with the [DOC] policy in effect during the relevant period of time.”¹³⁵ The sole support for this conclusory assertion is a citation to *Williams I*, in which we stated that the DOC’s interpretation of

¹³³ See *supra* Section I.b., n. 34, 35.

¹³⁴ 1998 Pa. Legis. Serv. Act 1998-80 (West).

¹³⁵ Appellee Br. 21. Defendants do not argue that Section 4303 prohibited them from removing death-row prisoners, like Williams, from solitary confinement after their death warrant had expired. Nor could they. The Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court has held that pursuant to Section 4303, “[o]nce [a death] warrant has expired . . . ‘it is entirely a matter of the Department’s discretion where to house an [incarcerated person].’” *Porter*, 974 F.3d at 445 n.9 (quoting *Clark v. Beard*, 918 A.2d at 160). Therefore, after 2005, when Williams’ warrant expired, the DOC had discretion as to where to hold him.

Section 4303, which resulted in the DOC's continued confinement of individuals on death row, was "not without support."¹³⁶

The relevant passages from *Williams I* are inapposite, as that opinion addressed alleged violations of procedural due process rights, not cruel and unusual punishment.¹³⁷ Moreover, in *Williams I*, we had no occasion to consider whether the DOC's indiscriminate practice of keeping people with known preexisting serious mental illness in solitary confinement indefinitely without penological justification was reasonable because *the plaintiff did not allege that he had a known preexisting serious mental illness*. And absent individualized evidence demonstrating that prison officials kept an inmate in solitary confinement for a legitimate penological purpose, DOC's blanket policy of keeping people with known preexisting serious mental illness in solitary confinement solely because they were sentenced to death, even in the absence of an active death warrant, amounted to "foul" and "inhuman" "conditions of confinement . . . without penological justification,"¹³⁸ a classic Eighth

¹³⁶ *Williams I*, 848 F.3d at 571.

¹³⁷ *See id.* at 557–76. Even if *Williams I* did concern cruel and unusual punishment, it would still be inapplicable. In *Williams I*, we concluded that the DOC's policy was "only relevant to our qualified immunity analysis because the case law . . . did not adequately inform [the defendants] that the policy ran counter to Plaintiffs' protected liberty interests." As explained, that is not the case here.

¹³⁸ *Clark*, 55 F.4th at 183 (quoting *Young*, 960 F.2d at 364).

Amendment violation.¹³⁹ Moreover, we are not willing to accept the argument that one can escape liability by relying upon a policy that s/he knows to be unconstitutional.¹⁴⁰ Given the 2014 DOJ report, the Secretary had to know that any policy requiring an individual with a known preexisting serious mental illness to be confined in solitary without a legitimate penological justification was contrary to law.¹⁴¹

Accordingly, we hold that individuals with a known history of serious mental illness have a clearly established right not to be subjected to prolonged, indefinite solitary confinement—without penological justification—by an official who was aware of that history and the risks that solitary confinement pose to someone with those health conditions. To hold otherwise would fail in the face of Eighth Amendment

¹³⁹ The cruelty of the DOC's policy is exacerbated by the practice of keeping lights in solitary cells on twenty-four hours a day. We cannot think of any legitimate penological purpose for this—especially given the impact it could have on someone with serious mental illness; and the Secretary offers none.

¹⁴⁰ Just as we do not “equate policy violations with constitutional violations,” *McKenna v. City of Philadelphia*, 582 F.3d 447, 461 (3d Cir. 2009), adherence to policy does not compel the conclusion that no constitutional violation occurred.

¹⁴¹ Moreover, Secretary Wetzel readily admits that he “is familiar with the work of [researcher] Dr. [Craig] Haney, which sets forth at length the harmful effects of solitary confinement.” *Johnson v. Wetzel*, 209 F. Supp. 3d 766, 779 (M.D. Pa. 2016). In light of this research, he acknowledges that “‘long term’ solitary confinement ‘certainly could’ have negative effects on mental health.” *Id.*

jurisprudence.¹⁴² Given this record, the right at issue was clearly established.

The dissent improperly truncates our holding, and then criticizes the subsequent vagueness created by its own truncation. Despite the dissent’s assertion to the contrary, we do not hold that “prison officials [are prohibited] from housing a mentally ill inmate in solitary confinement for long periods of time.”¹⁴³ Indeed, our holding is limited to the specific allegations of this appeal from the grant of summary judgment and is as we have just stated in the preceding paragraph.

Lest there be any confusion, we reiterate that we hold “that individuals with a known history of serious mental illness have a clearly established right not to be subjected to prolonged, *indefinite* solitary confinement—*without penological justification—by an official who was aware of that history and the risks that solitary confinement pose to someone with those serious health conditions.*”¹⁴⁴ That is nearly identical to the

¹⁴² As previously stated, Williams also argues that the Secretary is not entitled to qualified immunity because he was deliberately indifferent to Williams’ health and safety by knowingly subjecting him to twenty-six years in solitary confinement, despite his awareness of the serious risks such confinement posed. The District Court did not address this argument, and we need not reach it because we determine that the Secretary is not entitled to qualified immunity since there is a material issue of fact as to whether Williams put forth enough evidence to show a violation of a constitutional right, and the right at issue was clearly established.

¹⁴³ Dissent at 2 (quoting *Clark v. Coupe*, 55 F. 4th at 167) (internal quotation marks omitted) (describing how the lower court framed the right before clarifying the right to be more specific).

¹⁴⁴ Op. 33-34 (emphasis added).

holding in *Clark v. Coupe*,¹⁴⁵ and it is hardly a novel or surprising proposition. In *Clark*, we framed the clearly established right at issue as: “the right of a prisoner known to be seriously mentally ill to not be placed in solitary confinement for an extended period of time by prison officials who were aware of, but disregarded, the risk of lasting harm posed by such conditions.”¹⁴⁶ Relying on much of the same binding precedent *Clark* did,¹⁴⁷ our current holding merely clarifies that the clearly established right in *Clark* extends to individuals on death row.

Having clarified our holding, and again highlighted the many cases we rely upon to conclude that the right was clearly established here, the remainder of the dissent’s criticisms about our use of the 2014 DOJ report have little force. As we noted, the 2014 DOJ report concisely packaged much of the relevant and binding law and delivered it to the defendant’s doorstep.¹⁴⁸ In disparaging the relevance of the DOJ report to our analysis, our dissenting colleague misses the point. The DOJ letter addressed to Secretary Wetzel is not important because it had the force of legal precedent. We agree that it obviously did

¹⁴⁵ 55 F.4th 168 at 182.

¹⁴⁶ *Id.*

¹⁴⁷ *Clark* relied, inter alia, on *Hope v. Pelzer*, 536 U.S. 730 (2002), *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. 825 (1994), *Palakovic v. Wetzel*, 854 F.3d 209 (3d Cir. 2017), and *Young v. Quinlan*, 960 F.2d 351 (3d Cir. 1992), in concluding that the right at issue was clearly established. We do the same.

¹⁴⁸ Op. at 24. Notably, the dissent relies upon the hallowed precedent of *Marbury v. Madison*, 5 U.S. (1 Cranch) 137, 177 (1803), to suggest that our holding somehow violates the separation of powers, ignores the obvious principle that the courts, and not the executive branch, determine what is legal precedent.

not and could not have had the force of legal precedent. That is simply not the point, and it is not why the DOJ report that was on the record here is so important. Rather, it is important because it directly informed the Secretary that the practice of solitary confinement that had been investigated was a violation of the Eighth Amendment based upon the judicial decisions cited in the letter. The dissent would prefer we ignore that notice, but binding precedent and the fact that Secretary Wetzel was personally informed of the constitutional violation establish its relevance. And that personal notice simply buttresses our conclusion that *controlling precedent* clearly established that the conditions of Williams’s confinement violated the Eighth Amendment.

Moreover, our use of the DOJ report here is no more in tension with *Marbury v. Madison* than the Supreme Court’s use of the analogous DOJ report in *Hope v. Pelzer*. In both cases, the DOJ report buttresses the conclusion that “a reasonable person would have known” of the Eighth Amendment violation.¹⁴⁹ Following *Lanier*, which established the “fair warning” standard, *Hope* makes clear that for purposes of qualified immunity, the “salient question” is whether the state of the law gives defendants “fair warning”

See Dissent at 5.

Ironically, while expressing concern that the Majority disregards the role of the courts as set forth in *Marbury v. Madison*, our dissenting colleague relies on a single judge concurrence that disparages Supreme Court jurisprudence. Dissent at 7 (citing *United States v. Grant*, 9 F.4th 186, 201–07 (3d Cir. 2021) (en banc) (Hardiman, J., concurring) (criticizing the Supreme Court for “stray[ing] far from the text and original meaning of the Eighth Amendment”).

¹⁴⁹ *Hope*, 536 U.S. at 744 (citing *Harlow*, 457 U.S. at 818).

that their alleged conduct was unconstitutional.¹⁵⁰ Following that precedent, the Supreme Court explicitly held that “in light of binding Eleventh Circuit precedent, an Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) regulation, *and a DOJ report informing the ADOC of the constitutional infirmity in its use of the hitching post . . .* the respondents’ conduct violated ‘clearly established statutory or constitutional rights of which a reasonable person would have known.’”¹⁵¹

It should not be a controversial or novel proposition that a personalized report setting forth binding, applicable case law, and detailing how a specific defendant is systematically violating the Eighth Amendment, is highly relevant to a finding that such defendant had “fair notice.” We simply cannot agree with our dissenting colleague’s belief that the defendants should nevertheless be wrapped in the protective cloak of qualified immunity after such “fair and clear warning” of the clearly established law.¹⁵²

Finally, the dissent complains that even if we are correct in concluding that individuals with a known serious mental illness have the right not to be held in prolonged, indefinite solitary confinement, the case law upon which we rely does not provide adequate notice with regard to individuals on death row.¹⁵³ But as already explained, the health of the incarcerated person is what drives the Eighth Amendment analysis, not the type of sentence.¹⁵⁴ Moreover, as early as the

¹⁵⁰ *Id.* at 741.

¹⁵¹ *Id.* at 741–42 (citing *Harlow*, 457 U.S. at 818) (emphasis added).

¹⁵² *Lanier*, 520 U.S. 259, 271 (1997).

¹⁵³ *See* Dissent at [5].

¹⁵⁴ *See* Op. at 31.

19th century, the Supreme Court has recognized that solitary confinement is a severe and additional punishment *even for people on death row*.¹⁵⁵

A. Fourteenth Amendment

The District Court assumed Williams was bringing a substantive due process claim under the Fourteenth Amendment and concluded that Williams’ conditions-of-confinement claim was only cognizable under the Eighth Amendment. We review de novo a district court’s sua sponte dismissal of a claim under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2), and we review a district court’s decision not to grant leave to amend for abuse of discretion.¹⁵⁶

Because Williams was proceeding pro se, his complaint should have been liberally construed as asserting a Fourteenth Amendment procedural due process claim.¹⁵⁷ Williams’ allegations that he was subjected to “automatic placement in indefinite solitary confinement” and “without either individually assessing the risk he may actually and objectively pose for others . . . or otherwise justifying the need for isolations [sic],” indicates that he was alleging that he had been kept in solitary confinement without meaningful review or an opportunity to be heard.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ See *In re Medley*, 134 U.S. 160, 167–71 (1890). Although the Eighth Amendment was not considered in *Medley*, the Court concluded without hesitation that solitary confinement is “an additional punishment of the most important and painful character” that violates the *ex post facto* provision of the Constitution when added to a sentence after the offense has been committed because it increases the punishment. *Id.* at 171.

¹⁵⁶ *Dooley v. Wetzel*, 957 F.3d 366, 373, 376 (3d Cir. 2020).

¹⁵⁷ See *Vogt v. Wetzel*, 8 F.4th 182, 185 (3d Cir. 2021).

¹⁵⁸ J.A. 048–49.

Nonetheless, at the time of Williams' confinement, the due process rights of an active death-row prisoner had not been clearly established. The Court in *Williams I* held that individuals on death row who had been granted resentencing hearings had a liberty interest that prohibited the state from housing them in solitary confinement on death row without “*regular and meaningful* review of their continued placement.”¹⁵⁹ However, we did not reach a conclusion as to whether the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment limited the State's ability to subject prisoners with active death row sentences to prolonged solitary confinement.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, in *Porter* we did not reach a determination as to whether prisoners with active death row sentences had a procedural due process claim.¹⁶¹ Given that we have not determined whether an active death-row prisoner has a procedural due process interest in avoiding continued solitary confinement, the DOC is entitled to qualified immunity on this claim.

C. Claim Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

The DOC does not escape liability under the ADA because it placed and held Williams in solitary

¹⁵⁹ 848 F.3d at 576 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶⁰ *See id.* at 552 n.2 (stating that the Court “take[s] no position on whether any inherent risk posed by inmates whose death sentences are still active and viable is sufficient to raise a presumption that their continued confinement on death row is justifiable”).

¹⁶¹ *See Porter*, 974 F.3d at 438 n.2 (reasoning that it need not decide whether a prisoner on death row who has “not been granted [a] resentencing[] hearing and vacatur ha[s] a procedural due process interest in avoiding continued solitary confinement” (citing *Williams I*, 848 F.3d at 552 n.2)).

confinement pursuant to a since-revoked DOC policy. The District Court acknowledged that there was a material dispute of fact as to whether the Secretary knew Williams suffered from serious mental illness. Drawing all inferences in favor of Williams, we must assume that the Secretary was aware of Williams' serious mental illness. Therefore, under the ADA, the DOC had an obligation to modify its practices to ameliorate the harms of prolonged solitary confinement on Williams, or alternatively, demonstrate that the modifications would fundamentally alter the nature of the "service, program or activity."¹⁶² The DOC failed to do either of those things. Additionally, we find that Williams has stated a claim of deliberate indifference under the ADA where—viewing the facts in the light most favorable to Williams—the Secretary knew Williams had a preexisting serious mental illness, was aware of the risk of prisoner safety, and failed to act despite this knowledge.

1. The Elements of an ADA Claim

To bring a claim under the ADA, Williams "must demonstrate: (1) he is a qualified individual; (2) with a disability; (3) [who] was excluded from participation in or denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or was subjected to discrimination by any such entity; (4) by reason of his disability."¹⁶³ The ADA defines "disability" as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially

¹⁶² 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b)(7).

¹⁶³ *Haberle v. Troxell*, 885 F.3d 170, 178–79 (3d Cir. 2018) (quoting *Bowers v. Nat'l Collegiate Athletic Ass'n*, 475, F.3d 524, 533 n.32 (3d Cir. 2007)) (alterations in original).

limits one or more major life activities of such individual,” “a record of such an impairment,” or “being regarded as having such an impairment.”¹⁶⁴ “[M]ental illness qualifies as a disability under” the ADA.¹⁶⁵ The District Court correctly concluded that there is an issue of material fact as to whether the DOC knew that Williams had a serious mental illness, and therefore knew that he had a disability under the ADA.

Nevertheless, the Secretary now argues that Williams’ ADA claim fails because he was not placed in solitary confinement “by reason of” his disability but instead because of his death sentence.¹⁶⁶ Initially, we note that the DOC forfeited this argument by not raising it before the District Court.¹⁶⁷ However, even if the DOC had raised this argument, it would have failed, because it misconstrues Williams’ claim. Williams does not argue that he was placed in solitary confinement “by reason of” his disability. Instead, he argues that, considering his disability, the DOC failed to “take certain pro-active measures to avoid the discrimination proscribed by Title II [of the ADA].”¹⁶⁸ We agree.

Our decision in *Furgess v. Pennsylvania Department of Corrections*¹⁶⁹ is instructive. There, we considered whether Furgess, an incarcerated person

¹⁶⁴ 42 U.S.C. § 12102(1).

¹⁶⁵ *Disability Rts. N.J., Inc. v. Comm’r, N.J. Dep’t of Hum. Servs.*, 796 F.3d 293, 301 (3d Cir. 2015); 28 C.F.R. § 35.108(d)(2)(iii).

¹⁶⁶ Appellee Br. 30 (emphasis omitted).

¹⁶⁷ *Barna*, 877 F.3d at 146 (citing *United States v. Olano*, 507 U.S. 725, 733 (1993)).

¹⁶⁸ *Chisholm v. McManimon*, 275 F.3d 315, 325 (3d Cir. 2001).

¹⁶⁹ 933 F.3d 285 (3d Cir. 2019).

with a disability, had suffered discrimination “by reason of his disability.”¹⁷⁰ Furgess, who had received the accommodation of an accessible shower stall in general population, was placed in the Restrictive Housing Unit (RHU), “which lacked accessible shower facilities.”¹⁷¹ In response to Furgess’ disability discrimination claim, the DOC argued that Furgess was “deprived of a shower because his own misconduct landed him in the RHU, which lacked accessible shower facilities, not because the [DOC] intentionally discriminated against him on the basis of his disability.”¹⁷² We disagreed, and determined that the DOC had misconstrued the causation element under the ADA. We explained: “the reason why Furgess was housed in the RHU is irrelevant [A] prison’s obligation to comply with the ADA . . . does not disappear when inmates are placed in a segregated housing unit, regardless of the reason for which they are housed there.”¹⁷³

This same reasoning applies to Williams’ claim under the ADA. Although Williams was placed in solitary confinement pursuant to a prison policy, the DOC’s obligation to comply with the ADA did not disappear because of his death sentence. One who violates the ADA (or any other statute) cannot escape liability merely because the violation is a result a state policy that conflicts with federal law. Indeed, a contrary holding would erode the protections afforded by remedial statutes such as the ADA, as the rights they confer would depend on the vagaries of

¹⁷⁰ *Id.* at 291.

¹⁷¹ *Id.*

¹⁷² *Id.*

¹⁷³ *Id.*

governmental policies. Just as the DOC's failure to provide accessible showers in the RHU was not *by reason of* Furgess' alleged misconduct, the DOC's failure to provide Williams with reasonable accommodations for his disability was not *by reason of* his death sentence.

The DOC has an obligation to make "reasonable modifications" to "policies, practices, or procedures" where modifications are necessary to avoid discrimination on the basis of a disability.¹⁷⁴ Assuming that Williams had a known mental illness, the DOC had an obligation to modify its practices to ameliorate the harms of prolonged solitary confinement on Williams. The only way the DOC could avoid this responsibility is by "demonstrat[ing] that making the modifications would fundamentally alter the nature of the service, program, or activity."¹⁷⁵ The record is devoid of evidence that providing Williams with accommodations would have fundamentally altered the DOC's services, programs, or activities.

Moreover, the DOC's argument that no ADA violation exists because Williams' treatment is the same as that of nondisabled death-row prisoners reflects a "lack of appreciation for one of the chief purposes of the ADA."¹⁷⁶ The purpose of the ADA is to ensure that persons with disabilities can participate equally in society.¹⁷⁷ Because people with and without disabilities may have different needs, there are

¹⁷⁴ 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b)(7)(i).

¹⁷⁵ *Id.*

¹⁷⁶ *Anderson v. Franklin Inst.*, 185 F. Supp. 3d 628, 645 (E.D.Pa. 2016).

¹⁷⁷ 42 U.S.C.A. § 12101(a)(7).

instances in which providing equal treatment will not achieve the ADA's goals of equal opportunity. As Judge McHugh stated in *Anderson v. Franklin Institute*, “a facially neutral policy can still result in discrimination.”¹⁷⁸ “[A] person with a disability may be the victim of discrimination precisely because she did not receive disparate treatment when she needed accommodation.”¹⁷⁹ And as the Ninth Circuit has recognized, because facially neutral policies may “disparately impact people with disabilities,” “a public entity may be required to make reasonable modifications” to these policies.¹⁸⁰

Given the factual dispute as to whether the DOC knew that Williams had a serious mental illness and because the DOC failed to make modifications or accommodations to Williams' conditions of confinement, Williams' claim under the ADA survives summary judgment.

2. Compensatory Damages

¹⁷⁸ 185 F. Supp. 3d at 645. That decision explained, “[t]he ADA was promulgated in part to level the playing field for disabled individuals Stated differently, if disabled persons protected under the ADA were similarly situated to all other persons, there would be no need for the ADA in the first place.” *Id.*

¹⁷⁹ *Presta v. Peninsula Corridor Joint Powers Bd.*, 16 F. Supp. 2d 1134, 1136 (N.D. Cal. 1998) (citation omitted).

¹⁸⁰ *Payan v. L.A. Cmty. Coll. Dist.*, 11 F. 4th 729, 738 (9th Cir. 2021). We are not persuaded by the DOC's argument that, pursuant to our precedent in *Disability Rights*, 796 F.3d at 306, Williams must have pointed to evidence that he was “denied some benefit that a public entity has extended to nondisabled people.” Appellee Br. 31. Although in *Disability Rights*, we held as much, that was in the context of a claim that the appellant had been denied “public services, programs, and activities.” 796 F.3d at 301. In contrast, Williams argues that he was discriminated against *because of* his disability.

Compensatory damages, as Williams seeks here, are unavailable “absent proof of ‘intentional discrimination,’”¹⁸¹ which requires at least deliberate indifference.¹⁸² To prove deliberate indifference, the (1) “defendant must actually have known or been aware of the excessive risk to [prisoner] safety”¹⁸³ and (2) failed to act despite that knowledge.¹⁸⁴

The District Court determined that Williams failed to put forth evidence that the DOC acted with deliberate indifference. We disagree. The evidence here is uncontradicted as to the second factor: by neither removing Williams from solitary confinement for *twenty-six years*, nor making modifications to his conditions of confinement, the DOC failed to act. Assuming that Williams had a preexisting serious mental illness that the DOC was aware of, the only question is whether there is a genuine factual dispute as to whether the DOC actually knew that prolonged solitary confinement caused an “excessive risk” to prisoner safety.¹⁸⁵

We have already explained that the record includes evidence that suggests the DOC knew that prolonged solitary confinement causes an excessive risk of harm to prisoners with serious mental illness. For instance,

¹⁸¹ *Haberle*, 885 F.3d at 181 (quoting *S.H. ex rel. Durrell v. Lower Merion Sch. Dist.*, 729 F.3d 248, 261 (3d Cir. 2013)).

¹⁸² *S.H. ex rel. Durrell*, 729 F.3d at 263.

¹⁸³ *Beers-Capitol v. Whetzel*, 256 F.3d 120, 125 (3d Cir. 2001).

¹⁸⁴ *Haberle*, 885 F.3d at 181 (quoting *S.H. ex rel. Durrell*, 729 F.3d at 265).

¹⁸⁵ See *S.H. ex. Rel. Durrell*, 729 F.3d at 266 (“The relevant inquiry is knowledge.”).

the 2014 DOJ report concluded that the DOC was violating the ADA by (1) automatically placing individuals with serious mental illness in solitary confinement without an individualized assessment of their mental health needs and the appropriateness of such placement; and (2) failing to ensure that prisoners with serious mental illness placed in solitary confinement for reasons unrelated to their disabilities could “participate in and benefit from prison activities, programs, and services.”¹⁸⁶ That letter also provided the DOC with “narrowly tailored” remedies it could implement to ensure its compliance with obligations under the ADA.¹⁸⁷

The DOC’s contention that Williams improperly relied on a “generalized history” of ADA violations is unavailing. Although we have explained that “a generalized history of civil rights violations . . . would not necessarily demonstrate ‘a pattern’”¹⁸⁸ of violations sufficient to prove deliberate indifference, the DOJ’s report does far more than provide a “generalized history” of ADA violations. It documents the DOC’s pattern and practice of placing individuals with preexisting mental illness in prolonged solitary confinement, and explains that even where “solitary confinement is necessary,” the DOC fails “to adjust the conditions of solitary confinement to avoid harm to the prisoner.”¹⁸⁹ That report—coupled with the robust body

¹⁸⁶ J.A. 081–82.

¹⁸⁷ J.A. 083.

¹⁸⁸ *Haberle*, 885 F.3d at 182 (quoting *Beers-Capitol*, 256 F.3d at 137).

of caselaw and reports on the harms caused to prisoners with preexisting mental illness¹⁹⁰—creates a genuine issue of material fact as to whether the DOC was deliberately indifferent in subjecting Williams to prolonged solitary confinement under the circumstances alleged here. Accordingly, we will vacate the District Court’s grant of summary judgment on Williams’ ADA claim and remand for further proceedings.

V. Conclusion

For the above reasons, we will affirm the District Court’s order dismissing Williams’ Fourteenth Amendment claim, and we will vacate the District Court’s order granting summary judgment for the Secretary on Williams’ Eighth Amendment and ADA claims and remand for further proceedings consistent with this opinion.

¹⁸⁹ J.A. 080. This situation is much more akin to that in *Haberle v. Borough of Nazareth*, 936 F.3d 138 (3d Cir. 2019), in which we found that deliberate indifference had been plausibly pled in allegations that a police department was aware of a pattern of police encounters causing harm to people with mental disabilities but failed to adopt an accommodation policy. 936 F.3d at 141–42.

¹⁹⁰ See *supra* Part IV.A.

U.S. Department of Justice
Civil Rights Division
Assistant Attorney General
950 Pennsylvania Ave., NW-RFK
Washington, DC 20530

The Honorable Tom Corbett
Governor's Office
225 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Re: Investigation of the Pennsylvania Department of
Corrections' Use of Solitary Confinement on Prisoners
with Serious Mental Illness and/or Intellectual
Disabilities

Dear Governor Corbett:

The Civil Rights Division has completed its investigation of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' ("PDOC") use of solitary confinement on prisoners with serious mental illness ("SMI") and intellectual disabilities ("ID"). The investigation was conducted pursuant to the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act ("CRIPA"), 42 U.S.C. § 1997. CRIPA authorizes the Department of Justice to seek equitable relief where conditions in state correctional facilities violate the rights of prisoners protected by the Constitution or laws of the United States.

We opened this systemwide investigation after having found that one of Pennsylvania's prisoners—the State Correction Institution at Cresson—routinely

subjected prisoners with SMI/ID¹ to solitary confinement under conditions that violated their constitutional rights and their rights under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”), 42 U.S.C §§ 12131- 12134. We notified you of both our findings concerning Cresson and our decision to conduct a systemwide investigation in a letter dated May 31, 2013 (“Cresson Findings Letter”). See www.justice.gov/crt/about/spl/documents/cresson_findings_5-31-13.pdf.

Our systemwide investigation found that the Commonwealth uses solitary confinement in ways that violate the rights of prisoners with SMI/ID. However, it is important to note that in the months since we issued our Cresson Findings Letter, the overall number of prisoners with SMI/ID that PDOC subjects to solitary confinement has gone down. Moreover, PDOC’s leadership had been developing new policies that, if adopted and implemented, would further reduce the number of prisoners with SMI/ID in solitary and improve mental health services for prisoners with SMI. Nonetheless, much more needs to be done. Throughout the PDOC system, hundreds of prisoners with SMI/ID remain in solitary confinement for months and sometimes years, with devastating consequences to their mental health, in violation of their rights under the Eighth Amendment and the ADA.

In our review, we looked at the totality of the conditions confronting prisoners in solitary and the presence or absence of mechanisms to mitigate harms arising from these conditions. To reach out investigative findings, it was necessary to assess the

¹ We use the shorthand “SMI/ID” in this letter, but note that, while there is some overlap, most prisoners with SMI do not have ID and vice versa.

conditions in which prisoners were held, the practices of PDOC, the duration of confinement, the decisions made relating to security reasons and penological concerns, the available programs and services, and the precise harms found by our expert-consultants. We concluded that these conditions collectively violated the constitutional and statutory rights of prisoners with serious mental illness and intellectual disabilities².

Throughout our investigation, Secretary John Wetzel and his staff provided us with exceptional cooperation. We look forward to collaborating with them in the coming months to fashion an agreement between the United States and the Commonwealth that effectively addresses our shared concerns.

I. Summary of Findings

PDOC has begun reforming the way in which it uses solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI/ID. In recent months, PDOC has implemented new procedures for the disciplinary process. IT has also implemented new protocols for the treatment of prisoners with SMI in certain specialized housing units. These reforms have led to a reduction in the number of prisoners with SMI subjected to solitary confinement. Moreover, PDCO is in the process of drafting policies geared toward further reducing the number of prisoners with SMI/ID housed in isolation units and improving mental health care for prisoners with SMI. While the Commonwealth has made

² In making these findings, the Department of Justice does not intend to suggest that every use of solitary confinement on persons with SMI/ID is a *per se* violation of the Eighth Amendment or the ADA.

important improvements, much more work needs to be done to ensure sustained compliance with the mandates of the Constitution and the ADA. Below we summarize our factual determinations and our ongoing concerns:

- **The manner in which PDOC subjects prisoners with SMI to prolonged periods of solitary confinement involves conditions that are often unjustifiably harsh and in which these prisoners routinely have difficulty obtaining adequate mental health care:**

In the one-year period between May 2012 and May 2013, PDOC confined more than 1,000 prisoners on its active mental health roster in solitary confinement for more than 90 days.³ Nearly 250 of those prisoners were in solitary confinement for more than a year. There are still roughly 115 prisoners PDOC identifies as having SMI who are in solitary. Our expert-consultants have concluded that the 115 number grossly understates the number of prisoners with SMI currently subjected to solitary confinement, estimating that there are

³ PDOC separates its active mental health roster into two categories: (1) those prisoners designated as having “the most serious need for mental health services;” and (2) those designated as having a “present mental health need.”

⁴ PDOC has newly revised its active mental health roster. It designates only those in the first category as having SMI. However, after reviewing medical records and interviewing prisoners, we and our expert-consultants in mental health have concluded that a very significant number of the prisoners currently designated as not having SMI and thus are assigned to PDOC's second category indeed have SMI. We also identified other prisoners with SMI who are left off PDOC's active mental health roster entirely.

hundreds more.⁴ The conditions that prisoners with SMI face while in solitary confinement are harsh. They are routinely confined to their cells for 23 hours a day, denied adequate mental health care, and subjected to punitive behavior modification plans, forced idleness and loneliness, unsettling noise and stench, harassment by correctional officers, and the excessive use of full-body restraints.

- **The manner in which PDOC uses solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI results in serious harm:**

PDOC uses isolation on prisoners with SMI in a way that exacerbates their mental illness and leads to serious psychological and physiological harms. Indeed, our expert-consultants interviewed and reviewed the records of more than two dozen prisoners whom they concluded were seriously harmed by solitary confinement in various ways, including severe mental deterioration, psychotic decompensation, and acts of self-harm. For instance, even though only a small fraction of the prisoners at the prisons we toured were housed in solitary confinement units, most of the suicide attempts occurred in those units. Specifically, more than 70% of the documented suicide attempts between January 1, 2012 and May 31, 2013 occurred in the solitary confinement units.

- **Numerous systemic deficiencies contribute to PDOC's extensive use of solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI**

PDOC routinely resorts to using prolonged solitary confinement on those with SMI primarily because systemic deficiencies interfere with its ability to provide adequate mental health treatment. When we initiated our investigation in May, prisoners with SMI were placed in solitary confinement at twice the rate of prisoners without SMI. Too often, instead of providing appropriate mental health care, PDOC's response to mental illness is to warehouse vulnerable prisoners in solitary confinement cells.

- **The manner in which PDOC uses solitary confinement also harms prisoners with ID:**

PDOC uses solitary confinement on a significant number of prisoners with ID, as defined below. Prisoners with ID are especially susceptible to the harmful effects of PDOC's use of solitary confinement. They have limited coping mechanisms and their mental health is prone to deteriorating when subjected to the stressors present in PDOC's solitary confinement units. We believe that PDOC is not adequately addressing such concerns.

- **The manner in which PDOC uses solitary confinement often discriminates against prisoners with SMI/ID:**

PDOC often unnecessarily and inappropriately places prisoners in solitary confinement because they have SMI/ID. Isolating prisoners on the basis of their SMI/ID without adequate justification constitutes impermissible discrimination and unjustifiably denies when access to services and programs provided to most other prisoners. PDOC has filed to make reasonable

modifications to its policies, procedures, and practices to meet the needs of prisoners with SMI/ID in the most integrated setting appropriate to their needs and consistent with legitimate safety requirements. Instead it has routinely elected to segregate these prisoners unnecessarily in its solitary confinement units.

PDOC's solitary confinement practices violate the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against "cruel and unusual punishments." Embodying "broad and idealistic concepts of dignity, civilized standards, humanity, and decency." *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97, 102 (1976), the Amendment prohibits officials from disregarding conditions of confinement that subject prisoners to an excessive risk of harm. *Farmer v. Brennan*, 511 U.S. 825, 843 (1994), PDOC's use of a harsh form of solitary confinement for extended periods of time on hundreds of prisoners with SMI/ID constitutes precisely the type of indifference to excessive risk of harm the Eighth Amendment prohibits.

The practices described in this letter also violate the ADA. The ADA prohibits prisons from discriminating against prisoners with disabilities. 42 U.S.C. § 12132; 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(a). It generally obligates prisons to provide qualified prisoners with disabilities the opportunity to participate in and benefit from prison services, programs, and activities, and absent legitimate justification, to do so in the most integrated setting appropriate to individual prisoners with disabilities. See 28 C.F.R. §§ 35.130(a),(d), 35.150, 35.152; *Pa. Dep't of Corr.v. Yeskey*, 524 U.S. 206, 210 (1998); *Chisolm v. McManimon*, 275 F.3d 315, 324-25

(3rd Cir. 2001). PDOC uses solitary confinement in a way that is at odds with these requirements.

II. Methodology, Definitions, and Background

A. Methodology

In August 2013, we conducted on-site inspections of six PDOC prisons.⁵ We conducted the tours with the assistance of two expert-consultants in mental health treatment, suicide prevention, and the effects of solitary confinement. We interviewed PDOC leadership, administrative staff members, security staff members, medical and mental health staff members, and prisoners. We reviewed documents related to the use of solitary confinement to all 26 of the Commonwealth prisons before, during, and after our site visits. These include policies and Commonwealth's prisons before, during, and after our site visits. These include policies and procedures, medical and mental health records, cell histories, incident reports, disciplinary reports, suicide reviews, and unit logs. We also observed prisoners in various settings throughout the facilities. Consistent with our commitment to providing technical assistance and conducting a transparent investigation, we conducted exit conferences after each of our on-site inspections.

⁵ One of the prisons we toured—SCI Greene—is the facility using solitary confinement on the greatest number of prisoners by far. We also toured SCI-Fayette, SCI-Smithfield, SCI-Rockview, SCI-Muncy, and SCI-Dallas.

B. Definitions

Terms we use throughout this letter are defined as follows:

- **“Isolation” or “solitary confinement”** means the state of being confined to one’s cell for approximately 23 hours per day or more.
- **“Solitary confinement unit” or “isolation unit”** means a unit where either all or most of those housed in the unit are subjected to solitary confinement.
- **“Serious mental illness” or “SMI”** means “a substantial disorder of thought or mood that significantly impairs judgment, behavior, [or] capacity to recognize reality or cope with the ordinary demands of life.” Pa. Dep’t of Corr., *Access to Mental Health Care*, Policy 13.8.1., Section 2-Delivery of Mental Health Services § A.1.a (2) (2013) (we note that for this letter we have adopted PDOC’s own definition of SMI).
- **“Intellectual disability” or “ID”** means a disability characterized by both a significant impairment in cognitive functioning, and deficits in adaptive functioning, such as communication, reasoning, social skills, personal care, and organizing school or work tasks. See A., Psychiatric Ass’n, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* 33 (5th ed. 2013). An intellectual disability begins before the age of 22 and is chronic. As a substantial number of inmates may have some lesser form of ID, for the purposes of this letter, ID will refer

to having a highly significant impairment of functioning, generally indicated by an IQ score of 70 or below, that would be adversely impacted by prolonged placement in a solitary confinement unit.

C. Background

PDOC operates 26 facilities, housing approximately 50,000 prisoners. PDOC subjects at least 2,800 of those prisoners—roughly 6% of the system’s prisoners—to solitary confinement.

Roughly 2,400 of those in solitary are housed in Restricted Housing Units (“RHU”). Prisoners are housed in RHUs for violating prisons rules (disciplinary segregation) or to protect the security of the prison or the individual prisoner (administrative segregation). Prisoners in the RHU are usually confined to their cells for roughly 23 hours a day.

Another 400 prisoners are housed in one of the following types of solitary confinement units: a unit of Psychiatric Observation Cells (“POC”) (for prisoners who are mentally decompensating to the point of being considered a danger to themselves, other prisoners, and/or property); the Capital Case Unit (“CCU”) (for prisoners who have been sentenced to death); the Special Management Unit (“SMU”) (for prisoners who

⁶ Until this summer, prisoners in the CCU were confined to their cells for roughly 23 hours a day. In recent months CCU prisoners have been permitted one additional hour of recreation time per day. Prisoners in POC are confined to their cells for approximately 24 hours per day. Most prisoners housed in SMUs and STGMUs spend at least 23 hours a day in their cells. A small minority of the prisoners housed in SMUs and STGMUs are allowed a few additional hours of out-of-cell time per week after progressing to the least-restrictive part of these units' step-down programs.

exhibit behavior that presents a risk to the orderly running of the prison); and the Secure Threat Group Management Unit (“STGMU”) (for prisoners who pose a risk to the prison because of their affiliation with, and active involvement in, gangs).⁶

Until recently, PDOC used solitary confinement on many of the approximately 70 prisoners housed in its Secure Special Needs Units (“SSNUs”). The SSNUs were used to house prisoners with SMI who had a history of disciplinary infractions. Within the last couple of months, PDOC has eliminated its SSNUs, replacing them with the Secure Residential Treatment Units (“SRTU’s”). PDOC has represented to us that it does not intent to use solitary confinement on any of the prisoners housed in its new SRTUs.

III. Discussion

A. PDOC has begun to address the way in which it used solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI and to improve its mental health care practices.

In the recent months, PDOC has been reforming its solitary confinement practices. Currently, PDOC is preparing draft policies that, if correctly implemented, may reduce the number of prisoners with SMI subjected to prolonged isolation and improve the mental health care for this population. Moreover, during the summer, PDOC started to implement changes even though policies have not been finalized or adopted. Those changes include: (1) involving mental health staff members in the disciplinary process when the prisoners has SMI; (2) training a significant number of staff members in crisis intervention; (3)

converting SSNUs that functioned like isolation units into SRTUs that provide more treatment, out-of-cell activities, and positive incentives; and (4) training and using peer specialists in some PDOC facilities to provide additional support to prisoners with SMI housed in general population.

These initial reform efforts are already producing positive results. Over a three month period this summer, PDOC reduced the number of prisoners with SMI in solitary confinement by well over 100.⁷ Our expert-consultants found that these changes have dramatically improved the mental health of those removed from solitary. For example, one prisoner who had spent many months in an RHU and is now housed in an SRTU told us that “he came to hate himself” when he was in solitary, and that he now feels much better because he can more regularly get out of his cell. He also noted that he has greatly benefited from group therapy in the SRTU, where he can talk to prisoners facing similar difficulties. Line-staff members have also noted the positive changes. For instance, a staff psychologist commented on how she has recently seen

⁷ As we noted in the Summary of Findings section, PDOC has identified roughly 115 prisoners with SMI presently housed in solitary confinement units. Our expert-consultants have concluded that this number grossly underestimates the actual number of prisoners with SMI/ID still in solitary.

⁸ In December 2013, PDOC officials reported to us progress they felt had been made since our August inspections. These efforts included beginning to review serious injurious behaviors, establishing suicide prevention committees at each facility, accelerating crisis intervention training schedules for officers, and drafting a proposal to have an independent organization conduct a segregation reduction project on all prisoners regardless of their vulnerabilities.

a marked reduction in negative behaviors by prisoners as out-of-cell activities have increased.

Although progress has been made, there is still work to be done. Many of our major findings concerning the way in which Cresson misused solitary confinement still apply with equal force to the PDOC system as a whole. In the following sections, we discuss these serious, ongoing problems with the manner in which PDOC uses solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI. We also discuss the systemic failures that remain in place and contribute to PDOC's excessive reliance on solitary confinement as a control tool.⁸

B. The manner in which PDOC continues to use solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI violates their rights under the Eighth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

Despite the progress that has been made in recent months, we find that the manner in which PDOC continues to use solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI violates the Eighth Amendment's prohibition against punishments that are "cruel and unusual." There is no static test for determining whether conditions are "cruel and unusual." Instead the Eighth Amendment "must draw its meaning from the evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society." *Rhodes v. Chapman*, 452 U.S. 337, 346 (1981) (quoting *Trop v. Dulles*, 356 U.S. 86, 101 (1958)).

By subjecting prisoners with SMI to prolonged periods of solitary confinement under harsh conditions that are not necessary for legitimate security-related reasons, PDOC exposes them to an excessive and

obvious risk of serious harm. See *Farmer*, 511 U.S. at 828; *Hope v. Pelzer*, 536 U.S. 730, 738-745 (2002) (holding that prison officials show deliberate indifference where they disregard obvious risk to prisoner safety). Moreover, our expert-consultants observed that as a direct result of these practices, prisoners with SMI have suffered serious psychological and physical harms, including psychosis, trauma, severe depression, serious self-injury, and suicide. *Cf. Young v. Quinlan*, 960 F.2d 351, 364 (3rd Circuit 1992) (“The touchstone is the health of the inmate. While the prison administration may punish, it must not do so in a manner that threatens the physical and mental health of the prisoners.”)

- 1. PDOC subjects prisoners with SMI to prolonged periods of solitary confinement under harsh conditions where they routinely have difficulty obtaining adequate mental health care, which in combination pose an excessive risk to the mental health of prisoners.**

The manner in which PDOC uses solitary confinement involves a number of factors that in combination violate the Eighth Amendment. See *Peterkin v. Jeffes*, 855 F.2d 1021, 1024-25 (3rd Cir. 1988) (holding that the district court appropriately considered the “totality of conditions” when addressing the constitutionality of Pennsylvania’s death row unit, where prisoners were confined to their cells for approximately 22 hours a day.) We did not consider any individual factor to be determinative. Instead, we assessed the constellation of conditions in PDOC’s solitary confinement units and the harms found by our

expert-consultants that resulted from these conditions and practices.

In reaching our conclusion, we considered the following factors:

- (1) The length of time prisoners with SMI spent in solitary confinement;
- (2) The extent to which the use of solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI interfered with staff members' ability to provide adequate mental health care; and
- (3) The unjustifiable harshness of the conditions that attended PDOC's use of solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI.

First, the manner by which PDOC routinely subjects prisoners with SMI to lengthy periods of solitary confinement involves conditions that our expert-consultants found subjected prisoners to harm or an unreasonable risk of harm and contributes to the Constitutional violation. As one court noted, long periods of isolation for those with SMI can be “the mental equivalent of putting an asthmatic in a place with little air to breathe.” *Madrid v. Gomez*, 889 F. Supp. 1146, 1265-66 (N.D. Cal. 1995); see also Am. Psychiatric Ass’n, *Position Statement on Segregation of Prisoners with Mental Illness* (2012) (“Prolonged segregation of adult inmates with serious mental, with rare exceptions, should be avoided due to the potential harm to such inmates.”), *Morris v. Travisono*, 499 F. Supp. 149, 160 (D.R.I. 1980) (noting that “[e]ven if a person is confined to an air conditioned suite at the Waldorf Astoria, denial of meaningful human contact for...an extended period of time may very well cause severe psychological

injury”); *United States v. Bout*, 860 F. Supp. 2d 303, 308 (S.D.N.Y. 2012) (“It is well documented that long periods of solitary confinement can have devastating effects on the mental well-being of a detainee.”).

From May 2012 to May 2013, over 1,000 prisoners identified on PDOC’s active mental health roster spent three or more continuous months in solitary confinement. Nearly 250 of these prisoners have been in solitary confinement for more than a year. Most of these prisoners were held in an RHU or one of the other solitary confinement units.

For many with SMI, PDOC’s use of prolonged isolation is mentally taxing because they can see no end point to it. We interviewed many prisoners with SMI who told us they believed they would never get out of solitary. Some told us that they had accumulated years of disciplinary time in the RHU and feared they would never be returned to the general population. Others explained that they had lost all faith in their ability to conform their conduct to the prison’s rules in a way that would allow them out of their isolation cell.

Second, the manner in which the PDOC uses solitary confinement interferes with its ability to provide adequate mental health treatment to prisoners with SMI and contributes to the

⁹ According to our consultants, prisoners with SMI may also need regular and meaningful counseling from mental health staff members, peer and other counseling skill building, and structured and unstructured activities. Activities may include eating out of cell, outdoor recreation, and showers. They explain that these types of activities provide opportunities for both socializing and organizing one’s life in the facility in a way that is therapeutic and important to the health of prisoners with SMI.

Constitutional violation. See *Coleman v. Wilson*, 912 F. Supp. 1282, 1320-21 (E.D. Cal. 1995) (adopting the magistrate judge’s conclusion that “inmates are denied access to necessary mental health care while they are housed in [solitary confinement]”). Appropriate mental health treatment for prisoners with SMI should involve much more than medication. Nat’l Comm’n on Corr. Health Care, *Standards for Mental Health Services in Correctional Facilities*, § MH-G-02 (2008). Prisoners with SMI must also have, among other things, “programming or appropriate therapies (or both) to meet the mental health needs of patients.” *Id.*⁹ Unfortunately, for much of last year, hundreds of prisoners with SMI spent months in solitary confinement receiving only medication and occasional “cell-wide” visits from mental health staff members, even though our expert- consultants found more care was needed for those inmates.¹⁰

Recently, staff psychologists at many of the prisons have started to conduct at least one out-of-cell therapy session per month for prisoners with SMI currently housed in an isolation unit. This approach constitutes a significant improvement over past practices.

However, PDOC continues to use practices that fail to ensure that prisoners with SMI in solitary confinement receive the mental health treatment they

¹⁰ A cell-side visit typically involves a member of the mental health staff standing outside a prisoner’s cell, attempting to speak to the prisoner through a food tray slot or cracks in a doorframe amid the commotion on the unit. Such a visit typically lasts for only a few minutes at a time, lacks confidentiality, and cannot be equated with a face-to-face, out-of cell consultation/therapy session. As one staff member explained, “You can’t do therapy in a hallway.”

need. *Cf. Casey v. Lewis*, 834 F. Supp. 1477, 1547-49 (D. Ariz. 1993) (describing the inappropriate use of isolation for prisoners with serious mental illness because “[d]uring lockdown, inmates are provided improper mental health care or no mental health care”).

PDOC also uses solitary confinement in a way that interferes with staff members’ ability to identify prisoners who are mentally deteriorating in their cells. The problem is particularly acute for under-diagnosed prisoners not on the mental health roster. One former staff psychologist explained that he found it difficult to appropriately assess the condition of prisoners in solitary confinement. He emphasized that his manager discouraged him from doing anything other than cursory cell-side assessments of prisoners’ mental health. He noted that for inmates who were inactive and in their cells most of the time, it was next to impossible to fully assess the condition of prisoners from cell-wide without an out-of-cell visit.

Third, unjustifiably harsh conditions often attend PDOC’s use of prolonged solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI. In combination, these conditions are dehumanizing and cruel and contribute to the Constitutional violation. *See Wilson v. Seiter*, 501 U.S. 294, 304 (1991) (holding that when conditions of confinement combine to “have a mutually enforcing effect that produces the deprivation of a single, identifiable human need,” they violate the Eighth Amendment); *see also Hoptowit v. Ray*, 682 F.2d 1237, 1247 (9th Cir. 1982) (“[T]he court must consider the ill effect of each condition in the context of the prison environment, especially when the ill effects of particular conditions

are exacerbated by other related conditions.”). While conditions for those housed in PDOC’s solitary confinement units vary somewhat by prison, there are consistent themes. PDOC’s prisons consistently subject prisoners with SMI to not just prolonged isolation, but also unnecessarily harsh and disorienting housing conditions, punitive behavior modification plans, and the excessive use of full-body restraints. These conditions serve only to exacerbate their mental illness. We discuss these conditions below:

Harsh conditions: Although by its nature solitary confinement typically includes aspects that would be considered harsh in the ordinary sense of the word, the particular use of solitary confinement on inmates with SMI in the PDOC system, when examined under the totality of the circumstances, includes unjustifiably harsh conditions, even though some of these conditions, standing alone, might not be inappropriate in other circumstances. Every prisoner placed in solitary confinement must spend almost his entire day confined to a cell that is less than 100 square feet in size—about the size of an average American bathroom. The cell contains a metal bed frame, a thin plastic mattress, metal sink, metal toilet, and metal desk with an attached metal seat, and sometimes a small shelf. At some of the prisons, the cell will also have a small exterior-facing window, but at many of the prisons, the cell has no exterior window and no natural light coming directly into it. Usually, the prisoner is locked in his cell behind a solid metal door. The door has a narrow slot (used for passing food trays and for handcuffing the prisoner before he can leave the cell), and a small plastic window with a view to either a hallway or the housing unit’s common area.

The lighting in the cell can be dimmed, but it can never be turned off, even at night. The noise level can be high, even at night, because of the yellow and banging of neighboring prisoners. The prisoner with SMI in solitary confinement in PDOC has limited out-of-cell time. Typically, he is allowed, at most, one hour in an empty and caged outdoor pen, five times a week, and a 15-minute shower three times a week. Recently, conditions for the prisoner PDOC has identified as having SMI also often includes one out-of-cell therapy session per month with a staff psychologist.

Before he can leave his cell, a prisoner must first submit to a strip search. Further, to get from his cell to an out-of-cell activity, the prisoner is at all times escorted by correctional officers and has his arms and legs shackled together. Many prisoners we spoke to told us that they rarely leave their cells because of these procedures. They explained that being strip searched, handcuffed, and led by tether by two corrections officers made them feel like animals. The female prisoners told us that the strip searches remind them of past sexual abuses.

Our expert-consultants found that in the solitary confinement units, conditions for the prisoner with SMI also routinely involve unnecessarily forced idleness and loneliness, where the idleness was unjustified by legitimate penological goals and not mitigated. For instance, looking at the totality of the circumstances, the prisoner with SMI in disciplinary custody at an RHU generally had no access to television or radio; has only limited access to reading

¹¹ We do note, however, that it is appropriate for a correctional system to remove privileges as a part of the disciplinary process.

materials; cannot make telephone calls (with the exception of emergency calls approved by management); is denied contact visitation privileges; is denied any opportunity to have non-contact visits with friends; and, at most, can only have one non-contact visit per month with an immediate family member, lasting no longer than an hour.¹¹

Living conditions in the RHU routinely involve a mix of disorienting and uncomfortable sensory experiences. For example, the air quality is often poor because of inadequate sanitation and ventilation. At one of the solitary confinement units we visited where the sanitation was especially bad, prisoners complained *en masse* to us about the smell of the place. A prisoner there explained, “The smell is terrible. When a prisoner smears feces on the walls, it’s often left like that for days and the entire pod reeks of shit and makes you want to vomit.”

Punitive responses to symptoms of mental illness: In most of the solitary confinement units we toured (which were mainly RHUs), staff members routinely respond to the prisoner exhibiting symptoms of his mental illness by making his living conditions even more inhospitable. Prisoners with SMI in the solitary confinement units frequently engage in behaviors that may be signals of mental illness instead of intentional misbehavior, such as smearing fecal matter on their cell walls or repeatedly failing to comply with prison rules, including minor infractions like where to stand in the cell when receiving meals. All too often corrections officers respond to behaviors that signal mental illness not by seeking to ensure that the inmate received adequate mental health treatment, but instead by imposing additional restrictions on the

conditions of the prisoners' confinement. Restrictions can include harsh measures, such as unjustifiably requiring the prisoner to remain confined in his cell 24/7; denying the prisoner bedding material or running water and taking away the prisoner's clothes. Corrections officers are empowered to impose these restrictions for up to seven days at a time without conferring with mental health staff members and with nothing other than the approval of the unit's shift commander.

Corrections staff members also use housing assignments within the solitary confinement units as a way to punish prisoners for conduct related to their mental illness. For instance, in one of the RHUs, we found an unusually narrow cell that had no furniture in it other than a bed. When we asked about the cell, the corrections staff members at the unit assured us that prisoners were never assigned to the cell for more than a couple days at a time, and then only for their own safety. However, our records review confirmed the allegations of the prisoners on the unit who had told us that a prisoner with SMI had been housed in the cell for nearly half a year.

At all of the facilities we toured, prisoners with SMI in the solitary confinement units complained of officers verbally abusing them. Some prisoners alleged that officers had encouraged them to kill themselves. For instance, one prisoner with SMI alleged that as recently as July 2013, when he tied a bedsheet to his vent and stood on his toilet preparing to kill himself, a

¹² Prisoners housed in nearby cells provided accounts of the incident that were substantially consistent with what this prisoner had told us.

group of officers encouraged him to go through with it. According to the prisoner, the officers told him that they “wanted to see his feet dangling” and chanted “1...2...3... kill yourself,” repeatedly.¹²

Prisoners also alleged that officers working the solitary confinement units intentionally provoke prisoners with SMI into acting out. The prisoners claimed that the officers “push the buttons” of prisoners with SMI so as to have a basis for imposing additional restrictions on their conditions.

Unnecessary and excessive use of restraints: Excessive uses of full-body restraints often attend the use of solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI. Full body restraints are a type of restraint that should only be used in exigent circumstances, and only for the briefest time necessary to ensure the safety of the prisoner or those around him. See *Cresson Findings Letter* at 16-18. According to our consultants, corrections officers should rarely have to use a full-body restraint on a prisoner for anywhere close to seven hours. Nonetheless, of the more than 260 full-body restraint incidents between January 2012 and June 2013, almost 75% lasted longer than 7 hours and, 15% lasted longer than 12 hours. This data, along with our review of the records relating to PDOC’s use of restraints, indicate that corrections officers routinely use full-body restraints for far longer than needed to avoid harm. Instead, they often appear interested in using the restraints as a means to discipline prisoners by causing discomfort or pain.

In sum, we have identified three factors indicating that PDOC uses solitary confinement in a way that poses an excessive and obvious risk of harm

to prisoners with SMI. First, PDOC often uses solitary confinement on vulnerable prisoners with SMI for prolonged periods of time. Second, PDOC uses solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI in a way that frequently interferes with its ability to provide them with the mental health care they need. And third, extreme conditions—such as the excessive use of full-body restraints—routinely attend PDOC’s use of solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI.

2. The way in which PDOC uses solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI has resulted in serious harm

The way PDOC uses solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI has led to serious harm. At the prisons we visited, a disproportionate amount of the self-harm continues to occur in the isolation units, just as it did in Cresson. Between January 1, 2012 and May 31, 2013, although only a small fraction of PDOC’s prisoners were housed in one of the solitary confinement units, 206 of the 288 documented suicide attempts occurred there. Our expert-consultants interviewed and/or reviewed records of more than two dozen prisoners who they have concluded were directly harmed by their conditions in solitary confinement in various ways, including mental deterioration, increased psychosis, and acts of self-harm and suicide.

Below we discuss the experiences of two of the individuals our expert-consultants interviewed in greater detail to illustrate the types of harms prisoners are suffering as a consequence of the way in which PDOC uses solitary. The first case involves a prisoner

¹³ To protect the identity of prisoners, we use coded initials.

PDOC initially identified as having SMI, who PDOC held in solitary confinement for roughly ten months. The expert-consultant who interviewed the prisoner and reviewed his records concluded that the way in which solitary confinement was used on him led to a deterioration in his mental health and to suicide attempts.

The second case involves a prisoner who went into solitary confinement without SMI. According to a former staff psychologist we spoke to, PDOC failed to identify him as someone in need of treatment mainly because PDOC uses solitary confinement in a way that interferes with its ability to effectively screen for mental illness. Now, after many years in solitary, this prisoner has schizophrenia and has difficulty speaking in complete sentences. According to the expert-consultant who interviewed this prisoner and reviewed his records, this prisoner's decompensated state is principally attributable to his experiences in solitary confinement.

Example 1—Prisoner AA¹³

In February 2013, Prisoner AA—who has a mood disorder, and IQ of 66, and is on PDOC's mental health roster—attempted to hang himself after more than five months in solitary confinement in the facility's RHU. After his suicide attempt, staff moved him to a POC for one day, and then returned him to the RHU. After another roughly five months in solitary confinement in the RHU, Prisoner AA again attempted to hang himself. Fortunately, a week before we toured the facility, Prisoner AA was transferred to the SRTU. Conditions there are markedly better. Prisoner AA is no longer subjected to solitary confinement. He

receives much more mental health care treatment, and his mental health has improved considerably.

According to one of our expert-consultants who interviewed Prisoner AA and reviewed his medical records, at the time of his suicide attempts, Prisoner AA exhibited symptoms consistent with a type of delirium that can result from subjecting a prisoner with SMI to prolonged isolation under certain conditions. Prisoner AA had told our consultant that while in the RHU, he became hypersensitive to sights and sounds. He also experienced visual hallucinations. For instance, he recalled sometimes seeing his deceased brother encouraging him to cut himself and “come join me.” Prisoner AA also told our expert-consultant that when he experienced visual hallucinations of his brother, guards laughed at him and walked away, instead of referring him to psychology. He explained that in the RHU he became really depressed, and that his feelings of hopelessness made him want to kill himself and act out against the guards.

Finally, while Prisoner AA was in solitary, staff failed to pay sufficient attention when Prisoner AA expressed his intent to kill himself. For instance, records establish that before his second suicide attempt, Prisoner AA told staff he wanted to kill himself because they were ignoring his requests for a change in medication. The record also shows that just prior to his suicide attempt, Prisoner AA also “asked to see Psychiatry for a week and a half and...was tired of waiting to be seen.” Notably, the facility did not have a full-time psychiatrist at the time.

Example 2—Prisoner BB

Prisoner BB has been imprisoned in PDOC for approximately 25 years. For almost all of that time he has been housed in solitary confinement. BB had no mental illness when he entered the prison system. On his initial evaluation, he was described as friendly, motivated to engage in education activities (he was functionally illiterate), and unlikely to be a problem while incarcerated. After spending years in solitary, his mental health has badly deteriorated. Prisoner BB is floridly psychotic, disorganized, and unable to take care of his own personal hygiene and nutrition. He is locked in a cycle of chaotic behavior, mental deterioration, and disciplinary infractions.

According to our expert- consultant who interviewed Prisoner BB and reviewed his medical records, he has received virtually no mental health treatment while in solitary. Twice (in 2008 and 2012) his condition so deteriorated that he was admitted to an off-site inpatient unit that provides intensive mental health treatment. On admission, the records reflected that he had bizarre speech, disorganized behavior, extremely poor hygiene, and was responding to hallucinations. On both occasions, he improved dramatically while receiving the intensive care at the off-site inpatient unit. Instead of recognizing that his improvement confirmed that solitary confinement was harming his mental functioning, PDOC viewed it as evidence that he had faked or “malingered” mental illness while in solitary. After each of his brief stays at the off-site inpatient unit, Prisoner BB was returned to solitary.

As recently as April 2013, Prisoner BB was not on PDOC's active mental health roster and remained in solitary confinement. Fortunately, a week prior to our tour he was placed on the roster and recommended for admission to a psychiatric unit "to gain a better understanding of what mental illness, if any is present."

When we first encountered Prisoner BB in the RHU, we noted that the floor of his cell was covered in food. When our expert-consultant interviewed him, he mumbled that he was fine. Yet quite clearly he was not. He appeared disheveled and confused, trembled in fear, and almost incoherent.

To compound matters, we were told by multiple prisoners that BB is often harassed by corrections officers because of his delusions and incoherence. According to our consultant, an environment such as this makes it more difficult to develop an alliance for medication compliance.

One psychologist we spoke to told us that when he had earlier raised the issue of BB's mental instability with his supervisor, the supervisor had "turned a blind eye" to the situation. The psychologist told us that he was very concerned about Prisoner BB's mental deterioration, but that his supervisor was of the view that the monthly cell-side check-in psychologists provided to all prisoners in Prisoner BB's solitary confinement unit would constitute adequate mental health care for this prisoner.

These examples speak to the harm that has been directly caused by the specific manner in which PDOC uses solitary confinement on prisoners in SMI.

Though many of the prisoners with SMI have become too ill to describe their mental suffering while in solitary, many others were eager to tell us how solitary had harmed them. One prisoner told us, “I feel like it is hard for me to breathe here. I feel claustrophobic..I feel trapped...I feel angry inside..I feel like giving up. I’m helpless behind the door.” Another simply told us, “It’s just a black hole. They put you back here and leave you.” A prisoner with SMI who is now doing well in general population told us that in solitary he used to think a lot about “pounding [his] head against the wall.” Another prisoner with SMI still in solitary told us, “The only way you can talk to someone or get something done is if you try to kill yourself.”

C. Systemic deficiencies undermining PDOC’s mental health program pose an excessive risk of harm to prisoners and contribute to PDOC’s overreliance on solitary confinement as a means of controlling prisoners with SMI.

Instead of having systems in place to ensure adequate mental health care throughout its facilities, PDOC uses isolation to control prisoners with mental illness as they become more ill and less stable. The structural deficiencies plaguing PDOC’s mental health care system include inadequate: (1) continuity and coordination of care; (2) standing for mental health staff members; (3) criteria for assessing mental illness; (4) treatment capacity; and (5) oversight tools. These deficiencies lead to the unconstitutional use of isolation on prisoners with SMI, and pose a serious and obvious risk of harm to prisoners. See *Estelle*, 429 U.S. at 103-

05; *Inmates of Allegheny County v. Pierce*, 612 F.2d 754, 761-63 (3rd Cir. 1979) (holding that the Eighth Amendment prohibits deliberate indifference to prisoners' serious mental health care needs).

1. Poor coordination and continuity of care leads to inadequate mental health care treatment and the use of solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI.

Systemwide problems concerning coordination and continuity of care among staff members have impeded PDOC's ability to provide adequate mental health care. Poor continuity of care leads to more prisoners becoming mentally unstable. It also means that PDOC staff members are less able to identify how mental instability contributes to prisoners' conduct and more likely to resort to the use of solitary confinement as a control tool.

PDOC's mental health staff members routinely fail to coordinate with each other. This can result in confusion over diagnoses and a failure to follow treatment plans. For example, in one record we reviewed, a psychiatrist prescribed a medication for a prisoner only to have a different psychiatrist discontinue it at the next meeting and prescribe another medication with no explanation for the abrupt change. On at least one occasion, when we asked staff members about a treatment mistake that had led to harm, they each disavowed responsibility and blamed one another.

Poor recordkeeping also hampers continuity and coordination of mental health care. Prisoner records are regularly missing vital mental health information,

including information concerning diagnoses, prior treatment, medications, and family history of psychiatric disorders. Moreover, the mental health information PDOC does have is routinely scattered in different places not readily accessible to mental health staff members.

Our consultants identified many instances where inadequate continuity of care resulted in harm to prisoners. In one example, a staff member's failure to consider medications that had worked in the past for a prisoner led to the prisoner acting out in ways characteristic of bipolar disorder. PDOC staff members responded to the prisoner's behavior by disciplining him with time in the RHU. In solitary, he decompensated badly and attempted suicide.

2. Inadequate consideration given to the views of mental health staff members often leads to assignment of prisoners with SMI to solitary confinement units.

Systemwide, PDOC must do more to expand the role of mental health staff members in determining the conditions of confinement for prisoners with SMI. For instance, while we applaud PDOC's recent effort to enhance mental health staff members' role in the disciplinary process, that role is limited and not always credited in determining whether to house prisoners with SMI in solitary confinement units. For prisoners with SMI, mental health clinicians should have a large role in housing decisions because they have the clearest sense of how much prisoners will be affected by a particular housing placement.

Some mental health staff members we interviewed expressed frustration and resentment at the lack of respect shown to them by security staff members. They complained about the extent to which security staff members feel at liberty to ignore their recommendations.

3. Difficulties in recognizing how mental illness may cause maladaptive behaviors leads to the inappropriate use of solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI.

If PDOC is to avoid subjecting prisoners to solitary confinement for engaging in conduct related to their illness, it will have to ensure that its staff members, especially mental health staff members, can recognize the effects of mental illness when they see them. Our review of mental health records reveals a disturbing tendency by many of PDOC's clinicians to describe almost all disruptive conduct as purely willful and behavioral, and to overlook the role of the prisoner's mental instability in causing the conduct. Our consultants found cases of maladaptive behavior rooted in mental instability that PDOC's mental health staff members incorrectly characterized as "manipulative" or "malingering" behavior.

4. PDOC needs to commit more resources to mental health services in both general population and its specialized housing units to avoid warehousing prisoners with SMI in solitary

PDOC holds large numbers of prisoners with SMI in solitary, in part, because it devotes insufficient

resources to mental health care. If PDOC had more staff members to provide adequate care in general population, fewer prisoners would deteriorate to the point of having to be placed in isolation. PDOC must have an adequate number of mental health staff members and therapeutic beds to provide prisoners with the care they need.

Inadequate staffing is a problem throughout PDOC's mental health system. Our mental health expert-consultants found that at each of the facilities they visited, clinicians had large, unmanageable caseloads due to understaffing. For example, one facility we toured is supposed to have seven full-time psychologists, but has only four.¹⁴ An experienced psychologist we interviewed there expressed the belief that, even if the facility filled all seven slots, at least three more staff members would be needed to provide adequate care given the needs at this particular facility.

Resource constraints also prevent prisons from transferring prisoners to settings with more intensive mental health treatment. Mental health staff members we spoke to told us that they sometimes hold back on recommending transfers to such units because of a perception that bed space is limited. Further, delays occur because already-stretched mental health staff members must complete lengthy referrals for PDOC's review before transfers to therapeutic units can occur. If approved, prisoners must then wait for a bed to

¹⁴ In the past year, this same facility went eight months without a full-time psychiatrist. During that time, a part-time psychiatrist and two part-time psychiatric nurse practitioners tried to piece together enough hours to meet prisoners' psychiatry needs.

become available. Each delay adds to the time prisoners wait in solitary confinement without the mental health care they need. Cf. *Brown v. Plata*, 131 S. Ct. 1910, 1928 (2011) (recognizing that prolonged isolation may result in inappropriate delays in the provision of mental health care).

The need for more mental health staff members will only increase if PDOC follows through with its plans to have mental health staff members conduct more out-of-cell sessions in the solitary confinement units. Plans to expand the amount of mental health services provide in the new SRTUs will also require more staff.

5. PDOC lacks essential oversight tools to identify harms caused by inadequate mental health care and its overreliance on solitary confinement.

PDOC continues to lack key oversight mechanisms that would identify and address the harmful effects of solitary confinement and ensure the provision of adequate mental health care. We detailed at length in our *Cresson Findings Letter* how these essential oversight mechanisms did not exist and how this contribute to the system's dangerous use of solitary confinement. See *Cresson Findings Letter* at 26-31. PDOC's plans to begin tracking and analyzing mental health related information remain aspirational. Currently, PDOC does not track the number of prisoners with SMI in solitary confinement units; does not examine the role of solitary confinement in causing suicides; does not track self-injurious behavior; does not critically review serious self-injuries; and does not track or analyze the additional punitive responses that

prisoners with SMI experience in solitary confinement units, including, for example, use of force, food loaf, and hardened cells. This flawed oversight system prevents PDOC from identifying and correcting harms to prisoners.

D. PDOC's use of solitary confinement also poses an excessive risk of serious harm to prisoners with ID

In the course of our investigation, we encountered prisoners with ID housed in PDOC's solitary confinement units. Most of these prisoners also have SMI. According to our expert-consultants, some of these prisoners are especially susceptible, because of their limited coping mechanisms, to the harsh conditions of solitary confinement at PDOC. For example, we spoke to a prisoner who felt especially empty and lonely while in solitary because reading was the only distraction he was allowed, and his intellectual disability had rendered him functionally illiterate. Prisoners with ID also consistently described the solitary confinement units as places where the officers were more holistic than in the other units, and complained about the officers taunting them and calling them names, such as "retards."

PDOC should have better systems in place to assess whether prisoners with ID who are held in solitary confinement for extended periods have limited coping

¹⁵ The Department of Justice is charged with enforcing and implementing Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 12131-12134. The Department may conduct investigations and compliance reviews of public entities, enter into voluntary compliance agreements, and enforce compliance through litigation. See 28 C.F.R. pt. 35, subpt. F.

mechanisms that must be addressed to ensure proper mental health care. For instance, PDOC does not screen for ID. Instead, it screens for prisoners with low IQs—a flawed proxy for ID, as it is only one of several factors used in making a diagnosis of ID. Until PDOC fixes this problem, it will have difficulty keeping prisoners with ID out of solitary.

E. The way in which PDOC uses solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI/ID also violates Title II of the ADA.¹⁵

PDOC's solitary confinement practices also violate Title II in a variety of ways. See 42 U.S.C. § 12132. PDOC unjustifiably denies many of its prisoners with disabilities, including those with SMI and/or ID, the opportunity to participate in and benefit from correctional services and activities, such as classification, security, housing, and mental health services, or unnecessarily provides prisoners with psychiatric and intellectual disabilities unequal, ineffective, and different or separate opportunities to participate in or benefit from PDOC's classification, security, housing, and mental health services. See 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b)(1)(i)-(iv). PDOC unlawfully segregates and warehouses prisoners with SMI and/or ID in isolation units, without either individually assessing each such prisoner concerning the risk the prisoner may actually and objectively pose to others, 28 C.F.R. §§ 35.130(d); 35.139, or otherwise justifying the need for segregation, *id.* §§ 35.130(b)(8), (h). PDOC also fails to reasonably modify policies, practices, and procedures where necessary for PDOC to avoid discrimination on the basis of disability. *Id.* § 35.130(b)(7).

As discussed above, our factual determinations concerning PDOC's misuse of solitary confinement on those with SMI/ID largely mirror the determinations we made in the Cresson investigation. Systemwide, PDOC's practices violate Title II because the prison: (1) unnecessarily segregates and isolates prisoners with disabilities and fails to reasonably modify its policies and practices; (2) fails to either properly assess prisoners on an individual basis to determine whether segregation in an isolation unit is appropriate housing or otherwise justify their segregation; and (3) unnecessarily denies opportunities to participate in and benefit from services, programs, or activities to prisoners with SMI/ID who have to be segregated from general population but should not be isolated in their cells.

1. PDOC unnecessarily segregates and isolates prisoners with disabilities and fails to reasonably modify its policies and practices.

Title II of the ADA provides that "no qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any such entity." 42 U.S.C. § 12132. Title II extends to all of the prison's services, programs, and activities, including classification, housing, recreation, and medical and mental health treatment, among others, for which prisoners are otherwise qualified. See *Pa Dep't of Corr.*, 524 U.S. at 209-210, 213 (finding, without exception, that Title II "unmistakably includes State prisons and

prisoners within its coverage” and discussing “recreational activities” and “medical services” as covered under Title II to find a motivational boot camp to be a covered entity).

Both serious mental illness and intellectual disabilities, as defined here, qualify as disabilities under the ADA. 42 U.S.C. § 12102 (including “mental” impairments under definition of “disability” where they substantially limit major life activities).

The recreation implementing Title II of the ADA requires public entities to “administer services, programs, and activities in the most integrated setting appropriate to the needs of qualified individuals with disabilities.” 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(d); 28 C.F.R. § 35.152(b)(2) (requiring that prisoners with disabilities be housed in the most integrated setting appropriate to their needs under the program access obligation); *see also Olmstead v. L.C.*, 527 U.S. 581, 592, 597 (1999) (“Unjustified isolation, we hold, is properly regarded as discrimination on the basis of disability.”). The Justice Department explained in the 1991 Preamble to the Title II regulation: “Integration is fundamental to the purposes of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Provision of segregated accommodations and services relegates persons with disabilities to second-class status.” 28 C.F.R. pt. 35, App. B. Moreover, a covered entity, such as PDOC, may not provide unequal services to qualified individuals with disabilities, *id.* § 35.130(b)(1)(ii), and may not provide different or separate services to qualified individuals with disabilities unless the different or separate services

are necessary to provide benefits that are as effective as those provided to others. *Id.* § 35.130(b)(1)(iv). A covered entity also may not, directly or through contractual or other arrangements, utilize criteria or methods of administration that have the effect of subjecting qualified individuals with disabilities to discrimination on the basis of disability. *Id.* § 35.130(b)(3)(i).

Under the ADA, a prison must “take certain proactive measures to avoid discrimination.” *Chisolm*, 275 F.3d at 324-26 (holding that facility may have violated the ADA and discriminated against a deaf prisoner when it gave the prisoner pencil and paper instead of an American Sign Language interpreter, and failed to provide the prisoner a device to allow him to place telephone calls in private). The Title II regulation requires the Prison to reasonably modify its policies, practices, and procedures when necessary, as here, to avoid discrimination against prisoners with serious mental illness and intellectual disabilities. 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b)(7). Prisoners with disabilities thus cannot be automatically placed in restrictive housing for mere convenience. If prisoners with SMI/ID can be housed in general population by being provided adequate care, the prison may not house such prisoners in segregated housing without showing that it is necessary to make an exception. See *id.* § 35.130(b)(3)(i)-(ii) (prohibiting the prison from utilizing “criteria or methods of administration... [t]hat have the effect of subjecting qualified individuals with disabilities to discrimination on the basis of disability;... [or] have the purpose or effect of defeating or substantially

impairing accomplishments of the entity's program with respect to individuals with disabilities”).

PDOC unnecessarily segregates and isolates prisoners with disabilities and fails to reasonably modify its policies, practices, and procedures where necessary to avoid discrimination on the basis of disability. We found that PDOC is twice as likely to use solitary on prisoners with SMI and that over 1,000 prisoners identified on PDOC's active mental health roster spent three or more continuous months in solitary from May 2012 to May 2013. What we have learned from our tours of the facilities, our prisoner interviews, and our record reviews is that there is an overreliance at PDOC on isolation of prisoners with SMI (many of whom also have ID), and that PDOC has a practice of routinely warehousing prisoners with SMI/ID in solitary on account of their disabilities.

The practice of segregating prisoners in solitary confinement units where reasonable modifications would permit those with disabilities to remain integrated in the prison's general population conflicts with the mandates of the ADA. PDOC typically fails to identify prisoners who have SMI/ID that makes them susceptible to harm in solitary confinement and therefore fails to consider whether reasonable modifications are needed for such prisoners before deciding to house them in solitary confinement. Even when PDOC has identified that a prisoner's behavior is caused by SMI, it fails to consider reasonable modifications to either avoid confining the prisoner to solitary confinement, or if solitary confinement is necessary, to adjust the conditions of the solitary confinement

to avoid harm to the prisoner. As described above, PDOC could enable many more of its prisoners with SMI/ID to remain in general population by increasing coordination and continuity of care, expanding the roles of mental health staff in determining the conditions of confinement, providing more resources to mental health services in general population, and improving its screening mechanisms for identifying prisoners with ID. See *supra* pp. 544-47. Because PDOC fails to do so, prisoners with SMI/ID are unnecessarily and impermissibly segregated and isolated, PDOC must ensure that qualified prisoners with SMI/ID have as equal an opportunity as other prisoners to participate in and benefit from its housing and classification services, programs, and activities, and the benefits that flow from them, such as out of cell time, interaction with other prisoners, and movement outside of confined environments, consistent with legitimate safety and security concerns.¹⁶

2. PDOC fails to properly assess prisoners on an individual basis to determine whether segregation is appropriate housing.

¹⁶ The American Correctional Association Standards similarly provide:

The institution may be required to take remedial action, when necessary, to afford program beneficiaries and participants with disabilities an opportunity to participate in and enjoy the benefit of services, programs, or activities. Remedial action may include, but is not limited to:... making reasonable modifications to policies, practices, or procedures.

ACA, Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions § 4-4429 (4th ed. 2003 and Supp. 2010).

PDOC may impose legitimate safety requirements necessary for the safe operation of its services, programs, or activities, including classification, housing, and mental health services. 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(h). But PDOC “must ensure that its safety requirements are based on actual risks, not on mere speculation, stereotypes, or generalizations about individuals with disabilities,” *Id.*; cf. *Defreitas v. Montgomery Cnty. Corr. Facility*, 525 Fed. App’x 170, 179 (3d Cir. 2013) (holding that “courts should ordinarily defer to [a prison’s] judgment” so long as the “officials have [not] exaggerated their response to these considerations”). Similarly, PDOC may only impose or apply eligibility criteria that screen out or tend to screen out individuals with disabilities or any class or individuals with disabilities from fully and equally enjoying any service, program, or activity if such criteria are necessary for the provision of the service, program, or activity being offered. 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b)(8). Based on information available to us during the investigation, PDOC’s practices do not qualify under either of these standards.

Finally, Title II does not require a public entity “to permit an individual to participate in or benefit from ... services, programs, or activities ... when the individual poses a direct threat to the health and safety of others.” 28 C.F.R. § 35.139; see *Sch. Bd. of Nassau Cnty. v. Arline*, 480 U.S. 273, 278-88, 107 S.Ct. 1123, 94 L.Ed.2d 307 (1987) (finding direct threat under Section 504, which was codified at 28 C.F.R. § 35.139 for Title II, requires a showing of a “significant risk” to the health or safety of others that cannot be eliminated or reduced to an

acceptable level by the public entity's modification of its policies, practices, or procedures).

PDOC cannot categorically deny qualified prisoners with SMI/ID the opportunity to participate in and benefit from housing, classification, and mental health services. In order to establish direct threat, Title II requires PDOC to make individualized assessments of prisoners with SMI/ID, and their conduct, relying on current medical or best available objective evidence, to assess: (1) the nature, duration, and severity of the risk; (2) the probability that the potential injury will actually occur; and (3) whether reasonable modifications of policies, practices, or procedures will mitigate or eliminate the risk. 56 Fed. Reg. 35,694, 35,701 (July 26, 1991); 75 Fed. Reg. 56, 180 (Sept. 15, 2010); *Arline*, 480 U.S. at 287-88, 107 S.Ct. 1123. The Department explained in the preamble to the original Title II regulation in 1991 that “[s]ources for medical knowledge include guidance from public health authorities.” 56 Fed. Reg. 35,701; see also *Bragdon v. Abbott*, 524 U.S. 624, 650, 118 S.Ct. 2196, 141 L.Ed.2d 540 (1998) (explaining that, while not necessarily conclusive in all circumstances, “the views of public health

¹⁷ See, e.g., Am. Psychiatric Ass'n, Position Statement on Segregation of Prisoners with Mental Illness (2012), http://www.Opsychiatry.org/File%20Library/Learn/Archives/ps2012_PrisonerSegregation.pdf (“Placement of inmates with a serious mental illness in these settings can be contraindicated because of the potential for the psychiatric conditions to clinically deteriorate or not improve. Inmates with a serious mental illness who are a high suicide risk or demonstrating active psychotic symptoms should not be placed in segregation housing as previously defined and instead should be transferred to an acute psychiatric setting for stabilization.”).

authorities, such as the U.S. Public Health Service, CDC, and National Institutes of Health, are of special weight and authority”).

Applying the Arline factors, the individualized assessment should, at minimum, include a determination of whether the individual with a disability continues to pose a risk, whether any risk is eliminated after mental health treatment (e.g., whether the individual was denied medications, which resulted in the threat in the first place), and whether the segregation is medically indicated.¹⁷

Fundamentally, the individualized assessment should consider the views of mental health providers as to the prisoners' mental health needs and the appropriateness of the placement, See 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b)(7) (“A public entity shall make reasonable modifications in policies, practices, or procedures when the modifications are necessary to avoid discrimination on the basis of disability”); cf. *Purcell v. Pa. Dep't of Corr.*, No. 50-181J, 2006 WL 891449, at *13 (W.D. Pa. Mar. 31, 2006) (finding that a genuine issue of material fact existed as to whether a “reasonable accommodation” was denied when the DOC refused to circulate a memo to the staff concerning a prisoner's disability (Tourette's Syndrome) that explained that some of his behaviors were related to his condition, not intentional violations of prison rules).

To be sure, a public entity may, however, impose neutral rules or criteria that screen out, or tend to screen out, individuals with disabilities if the criteria are necessary for the safe operation of the program, provided that safety requirements must

be based on actual risks and not on speculation, stereotypes, or generalizations about individuals with disabilities.

PDOC has recently begun to include mental health staff members when making individual assessments of prisoners with SMI during disciplinary proceedings. However, the policy requiring participation of mental health staff members in disciplinary proceedings is currently only in draft form, and is not being consistently applied throughout PDOC's facilities. Further, mental health staff members are not involved in a review of prisoners who received disciplinary time before these policy changes occurred. These prisoners continue to remain in solitary. Also, at present, mental health staff members are not involved in administrative segregation decisions. For this reason, prisoners with SMI/ID are still being automatically placed in RHUs without an individualized assessment. Finally, PDOC does not and cannot conduct an individualized assessment of prisoners with ID when placing them into isolation, because it does not screen prisoners properly, as described above. See *supra* p. 549.

Accordingly, PDOC must continue to modify its policies and practices to ensure it is not unjustifiably and automatically placing prisoners with SMI/ID in segregation. Unfortunately, at present, PDOC often fails to meet the requirements of the ADA. Pursuant to the direct threat defense, each individualized analysis must evaluate whether the prisoner poses a health or safety risk to others, based on objective and medical evidence, including treating mental health professionals, and

whether modifications that do not result in automatic segregation will eliminate or reduce the risk to an acceptable level.

3. PDOC denies participation in and benefit from services, programs, or activities to qualified prisoners with SMI/ID who have to be segregated from general population but should not be isolated in their cells.

PDOC fails to ensure that prisoners placed in segregated housing for legitimate nondiscriminatory reasons can participate in and benefit from prison activities, programs, and services. For those prisoners with SMI/ID who cannot be integrated into the general population, the Facility still has an obligation to provide qualified prisoners with the opportunity to participate in and benefit from mental health services and activities, and other services, programs, and activities to which prisoners without disabilities have access. See 28 C.F.R. § 35.130(b). While we applaud PDOC's efforts to provide prisoners with SMI/ID housed in its new SRTUs with access to equivalent activities, services, and programs, those who remain in the solitary confinement units do not have access to anything remotely equivalent to what is provided to prisoners in the general population. *See supra* pp. 537-42.

IV. MINIMUM REMEDIAL MEASURES

To remedy PDOC's unconstitutional and unlawful use of solitary confinement on prisoners with SMI/ID, its failure to provide constitutionally adequate mental health care to prisoners, and

the violations of Title II and its implementing regulation, the Commonwealth should promptly implement the minimum remedial measures set forth below.

The remedies proposed in this letter are narrowly tailored to remedy the conditions that we found throughout the Pennsylvania prison system and are closely tied to our factual and legal conclusions. These proposals are remedial in nature, and seek to address the policies, practices, training, supervision and accountability systems changes necessary for Pennsylvania to overcome existing deficiencies and to come into compliance with the Constitution and the ADA. We note there may be different remedial approaches that would be adequate to address these types of issues.

A. Prolonged Isolation

PDOC shall ensure that;

1. PDOC's policies, practices, and procedures are reasonably modified and maintained so prisoners with SMI/ID are not unnecessarily segregated and/or isolated.
2. If a prisoner shows credible signs of decompensation in isolation, the prisoner's mental health needs are addressed promptly, and if the prisoner shows credible signs of decompensation and the possibility of removing the prisoner from isolation is considered. Whenever a prisoner manifests signs of decompensating, a mental health professional shall assess the prisoner's credibility.

3. PDOC properly assesses prisoners with SMI/ID on an individualized basis to determine appropriate housing.

4. The disciplinary or administrative segregation placement process accounts for the risk of self-harm from placement into isolation. Specifically, PDOC shall ensure that prisoners with SMI/ID can effectively participate in disciplinary proceedings, including the provision of appropriate auxiliary aids and services where necessary for effective communication and reasonable modifications where necessary to ensure a prisoner's meaningful participation in disciplinary proceedings. PDOC shall also develop and implement policies and procedures to assess whether to divert from isolation those prisoners whose SMI/ID contributed to their misconduct.

5. PDOC reports and reviews data regarding lengths of stay in isolation, particularly with respect to prisoners with SMI/ID, and shall take appropriate corrective action.

6. For inmates with SMI/ID who have to be segregated from general population, that such prisoners have the opportunity to participate in and benefit from services, programs, and activities available to prisoners without disabilities consistent with legitimate safety and security concerns.

B. Suicide Prevention and Protection from Harm
PDOC shall ensure that:

1. Prisoners are protected from suicide, suicide attempts, and self-harm.
2. Placement into the POC is short-term with intensive treatment and that prisoners are not discharged from POC to the RHU or other isolation without accounting for the risk of self-harm from such isolation.
3. All staff members are properly trained regarding appropriate responses to suicide attempts or self-harm, are trained on de-escalation techniques, notify mental health staff when time permits, and do not resort to force prematurely.
4. Staff members are properly trained and supervised regarding rounds in the isolation units; that rounds entail a meaningful observation of each prisoner's condition; and that signs of decompensation, risk of self-harm, or suicidal ideation are immediately addressed.
5. Suicides, suicide attempts, and self-injurious behavior are thoroughly documented and reviewed for implications to both security operations and mental health treatment, especially regarding the impact of isolation, and appropriate corrective action is taken.
6. PDOC shall develop an effective risk management system that adequately screens for suicidal or self-injurious behavior and monitors prisoners at risk for these types of harm.

C. Mental Health Treatment

PDOC shall ensure that:

1. Prisoners with SMI receive adequate mental health treatment and that such treatment is provided in a manner that ensures confidentiality.
2. Prisoners are properly screened and assessed for potential mental illness upon intake into the prison. All reasonable efforts to obtain a prisoner's prior mental health records are taken and that this information, along with all screenings, is incorporated into a prisoner's charts.
3. Prisoners on the mental health caseload receive a timely treatment plan that is periodically reviewed and updated.
4. Prisoners with SMI in segregated placements are offered adequate therapeutic and recreational out-of-cell treatment, consistent with their security levels and treatment needs, which is appropriately documented.
5. Prisoners with SMI have adequate access to more intensive mental health care units.
6. There are sufficient mental health staffing levels, taking into consideration the concentration of specialized units and the mental health population at the prison.
7. All staffing components coordinate with each other to ensure that prisoners have access to necessary mental health care and are informed of the practices and procedures on other units.
8. Mental health staff members have sufficient standing at PDOC facilities, especially with

regard to housing determinations.

9. Staff members assigned to the specialized units are trained regarding the needs of, and appropriate responses to, the mental health population and prisoners with intellectual disabilities.

10. Documentation of prisoners' mental health contacts and treatment is uniform, comprehensive, organized, and legible.

11. A meaningful quality assurance system for the mental health treatment program is in place and a range of data is collected, aggregated, and reviewed for appropriate corrective action.

D. Use of Force

PDOC shall ensure that:

1. The restraint chair, and other uses of force are not used as punishment or as a substitute for mental health interventions and are instead used only in instances where a prisoner poses a physical threat.

2. Staff members are trained on crisis intervention and de-escalation techniques and that mental health staff members are called in the case of a mental health-related crisis or a planned use of force for a prisoner with mental illness or an intellectual disability.

3. Data is provided and reviewed to assess whether the restraint chair is being overused and as part of an early warning system to identify staff members in need of additional training.

V. CONCLUSION

Like other state correctional systems, PDOC increasingly has been called upon to take on the task of serving as the state's primary caregiver for those with SMI. Many of these prisoners also have significant intellectual disabilities. However, PDOC's unenviable burden of having to take care of these prisoners cannot excuse its all too routine practice of using a harsh form of solitary confinement to control those with SMI and/or ID instead of providing them with the mental health care treatment they need.

Now is the time to put a stop to these harmful solitary confinement practices and to meaningfully improve the mental health services PDOC provides. We look forward to working collaboratively with Secretary Wetzel and his staff to address the violations of law we have identified in the context of settlement discussions.

Please note that this findings letter is a public document. It will be posted on the Civil Rights Division's website. The lawyers assigned to this investigation will be contacting PDOC counsel to discuss this matter in further detail. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Jonathan Smith, the Chief of the Special Litigation Section, at (202) 514-6255, Special Litigation Counsel Avner Shapiro, at (202) 305-1840, or the lead attorney on the matter, Kyle Smiddie, at (202) 305-6581.

Sincerely,
/s/ Jocelyn Samuels
Jocelyn Samuels

Acting Assistant Attorney General
United States Department of Justice
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/s/ David J. Hickton
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Brenda Tritt
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Frackville

Michael Wenerowicz
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Graterford

Louis Folino
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Greene

Kenneth Cameron
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Houtzdale

Tabb Bickell
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Huntingdon

Trevor Wingard

Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Laurel Highlands

John Kerestes
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Mahanoy

Brian Thompson
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Mercer

Robert Smith
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Muncy

Eric Bush
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Pine Grove

Mark Capozza
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Pittsburgh

Kenneth Cameron
Superintendent
Quehanna Boot Camp

Theresa DelBalso
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Retreat

Steve Glunt
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Rockview

Jon Fisher

Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Smithfield

Gerald Rozum
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Somerset

Wayne Gavin
Superintendent
State Correctional Institution at Waymart

Theron Perez
Chief Counsel
Governor's Office of General Counsel

Williams v. Secretary Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, No. 22-2399

PHIPPS, *Circuit Judge*, dissenting in part.

In denying qualified immunity to the former Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, John Wetzel, with respect to death-row inmate Roy Lee Williams’s claim for cruel and unusual punishment brought under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, the Majority Opinion relies on a new rule of constitutional law: death-sentenced inmates with *any* known history of mental illness cannot be subjected to prolonged solitary confinement. To arrive at the conclusion that such a constitutional right was clearly established between 2014 and 2019, when Williams was in solitary confinement, so as to defeat qualified immunity here, where Secretary Wetzel relies only on the ‘clearly established’ prong in seeking such immunity, the Majority Opinion ignores this Court’s precedent and misapplies foundational principles. For those reasons, elaborated below, I respectfully dissent.

The lynchpin of the Majority Opinion is its statement that “[u]ndoubtedly, holding a prisoner with a known preexisting serious mental illness in solitary confinement for a protracted period without penological justification would result in unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain.” Maj. Op. at 23 (citation omitted). Using that principle, the Majority Opinion articulates the right at issue as that of “a death row prisoner, with a known preexisting serious mental illness not to be placed and held in prolonged solitary confinement . . . without penological justification.” *Id.* at 22–23. The Majority Opinion, however, provides no

caselaw clearly establishing such a substantive right, much less its applicability to death-row inmates.

The Majority Opinion relies heavily on *Young v. Quinlan*, 960 F.2d 351 (3d Cir. 1992), but that case involved confinement in a dry cell as a means of enforcing prison discipline for a general population inmate – not a death-sentenced inmate in a non-dry cell. *Id.* at 363. And this Court in *Clark v. Coupe*, 55 F.4th 167 (3d Cir. 2022), has since emphasized that the articulation of Eighth Amendment rights in the context of solitary confinement is a “heavily fact-specific inquiry.” *Id.* at 183. The *Clark* decision applied that principle even after fully considering *Young*, by underscoring that “solitary confinement does not per se violate the Constitution ‘as long as the conditions of confinement are not foul, inhuman or totally without penological justification.’” *Id.* (quoting *Young*, 960 F.2d at 364). Thus, in light of the guidance from *Clark*, the factual differences between *Young* and this case preclude *Young* from providing the requisite notice with respect to the Eighth Amendment claim at issue here.

The Majority Opinion’s conclusion regarding the clarity of the right at issue also cannot be reconciled with this Court’s most recent solitary confinement decisions.

In *Williams v. Secretary Pennsylvania Department of Corrections*, 848 F.3d 549 (3d Cir. 2017), this Court first announced a rule that a prison’s policy of continuing to house death-sentenced inmates whose death sentences had been vacated in solitary confinement was unconstitutional. *Id.* at 570. But that rule was newly articulated, and this Court held that

qualified immunity applied because that articulation of the right was not clearly established. *Id.* at 553. Moreover, the rule announced in *Williams* was based on procedural due process principles and not the Eighth Amendment. *Id.* at 552. Also, that rule applied to only inmates whose death sentences had been vacated, but here, Williams’s sentence remains in effect. The *Williams* decision therefore does not provide the heavily fact-specific notice needed to clearly establish that Secretary Wetzel violated Williams’s Eighth Amendment rights.

Also in 2017, in *Palakovic v. Wetzel*, 854 F.3d 209 (3d Cir. 2017), this Court overruled a District Court’s dismissal of an Eighth Amendment claim for an inmate’s solitary confinement. *See id.* at 225–26. The allegations there differ in several key respects from the facts of this case: the inmate was not on death row – he was repeatedly housed in solitary confinement for penal purposes; the inmate was mocked for his mental health issues and abused by staff; and the inmate was denied medical care despite the documented deterioration of his mental health. *See id.* at 216–17, 228. Thus, under the heavily fact-specific inquiry applicable to the ‘clearly established’ prong, *Palakovic* does not provide the requisite notice to defeat qualified immunity in this case. *See id.*

This Court’s decision in *Porter v. Pennsylvania Department of Corrections*, 974 F.3d 431 (3d Cir. 2020), similarly does not provide the notice required to defeat qualified immunity. That case expressed a new rule applicable to death row inmates that “prolonged solitary confinement satisfies the objective prong of the Eighth Amendment test and may give rise to an Eighth Amendment claim, particularly where . . . [d]efendants

have failed to provide any meaningful penological justification.” *Id.* at 451. Because that articulation of the right had not previously been clearly established, this Court held that the defendants in that case were entitled to qualified immunity. *See id.* And even if *Porter* were factually similar enough to provide the requisite notice, it could not do so here because it was decided in 2020, after Williams’s period of solitary confinement ended.

Finally, in 2022, in *Clark v. Coupe*, this Court articulated an Eighth Amendment right with respect to solitary confinement with several qualifiers. But *Clark*, like *Young* and *Palakovic*, was not a case involving a death-sentenced inmate. And as recently as the *Porter* decision in 2020, this Court emphasized the significance of status on death row for purposes of assessing the constitutionality of solitary confinement:

Cases that challenge interpretation of death row policy and conditions on death row are distinct from cases brought by inmates in general population subject to solitary confinement.

Porter, 974 F.3d at 450; *cf. id.* at 461–62 (Porter, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part) (“Our Court has not held that the conditions of confinement on Pennsylvania’s death row are unconstitutional, and we have a long train of decisions to the contrary.”). Thus, even if the formulation of the right by the Majority Opinion were correct as to the general prison population, that would not be enough to provide adequate notice: there would still have to be additional precedent applying that formulation of the right to death-row inmates. And the Majority Opinion identifies no such case.

Under that tapestry of precedent, the right as articulated by the Majority Opinion was not clearly established between 2014 and 2019 when Williams was in solitary confinement.

Lacking precedent from the relevant time period for the proposition that it is unconstitutional to place death-row inmates with any history of serious mental illness in solitary confinement, the Majority Opinion makes a grievous error offensive to basic principles of separation of powers: it substitutes a 2014 findings letter from the United States Department of Justice for binding precedent. See Letter from Jocelyn Samuels, Acting Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice, & David J. Hickton, United States Attorney for the Western District of Pennsylvania, to the Honorable Tom Corbett, Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (Feb. 24, 2014) (JA62–89) (hereinafter the ‘2014 Letter’). But the Judiciary, not the Executive Branch, has the authority to announce binding interpretations of the Constitution. See *Marbury v. Madison*, 5 U.S. (1 Cranch) 137, 177 (1803); see also *Loper Bright Enters. v. Raimondo*, 144 S. Ct. 2244, 2257 (2024) (“To ensure the ‘steady, upright and impartial administration of the laws,’ the Framers structured the Constitution to allow judges to exercise that judgment independent of influence from the political branches.” (quoting *The Federalist* No. 78, at 522) (Alexander Hamilton) (J. Cooke ed., 1961)). And qualified immunity, which depends on fair notice at the time of the alleged violation of a federal right,¹ looks to judicial opinions – not letters from federal agencies – as the sources for such notice. See *Porter*, 974 F.3d at 449. So, treating constitutional interpretations of a federal

agency as having the force of judicial precedent is plainly incorrect. *See Loper Bright*, 144 S. Ct. at 2257 (“The Framers also envisioned that the final ‘interpretation of the laws’ would be ‘the proper and peculiar province of the courts.’” (quoting *The Federalist* No. 78, at 525)). Thus, a letter from a federal agency cannot satisfy the ‘clearly established’ standard for qualified immunity. And if the 2014 Letter – which addressed solitary confinement of both general population and death-sentenced inmates – did provide adequate notice of a clearly established constitutional right, then why has no subsequent decision of this Court – *Williams*, *Palakovic*, *Porter*, or *Clark* – relied on the 2014 Letter for that purpose? The answer is simple: a letter from an Executive Branch agency does not suffice for notice under the ‘clearly established’ prong of qualified immunity. By contravening that principle and doing what those prior cases did not, the Majority Opinion makes a big mistake.

The Majority Opinion attempts to legitimize its reliance on the 2014 Letter by noting that the Supreme Court in *Hope v. Pelzer*, 536 U.S. 730 (2002), relied on a report from the United States Department of Justice. But the Supreme Court used that report –

¹ *See Rivas-Villegas v. Cortesluna*, 595 U.S. 1, 5, 142 S.Ct. 4, 211 L.Ed.2d 164 (2021) (explaining a government official has ‘fair notice’ if at the time of the alleged constitutional violation it was ‘beyond debate’ such that “every reasonable official would have understood that what he is doing violates that right” (quoting *see also Mullenix v. Luna*, 577 U.S. 7, 11, 136 S.Ct. 305, 193 L.Ed.2d 255 (2015) (per curiam))); *Burns v. Pennsylvania Dep’t of Corr.*, 642 F.3d 163, 177 (3d Cir. 2011) (“Because qualified immunity is intended to protect officials absent ‘fair warning’ that their conduct violates constitutional guarantees, we examine qualified immunity from the perspective of the official at the time of the violation.”).

not as a substitute for precedent – but rather as evidence for the proposition that the conduct at issue there (tying a shirtless prisoner to a hitching post in the Alabama sun for seven hours without bathroom breaks and with only one or two offers of water) was obviously a violation of the Eighth Amendment. *See id.* at 734–35. Here, however, the Majority Opinion does not use the 2014 Letter for that purpose. Instead, it uses the 2014 Letter to set a date certain on which a constitutional right was clearly established – the date of the 2014 Letter.

That is impermissible under *Hope*. Although the modern Eighth Amendment jurisprudence uses an evolving-standard of- decency analysis, *see United States v. Grant*, 9 F.4th 186, 201–07 (3d Cir. 2021) (en banc) (Hardiman, J., concurring) (recounting with skepticism the development of that strand of Eighth Amendment jurisprudence because it “strayed far from the text and original meaning of the Eighth Amendment”), the *Hope* exception for obvious constitutional violations applies only to conduct that has always been obviously cruel and unusual. *See Hope*, 536 U.S. at 741–42; *see also Taylor v. Riojas*, 592 U.S. 7, 8–9 (2020) (per curiam) (holding “any reasonable officer should have realized” that it was unconstitutional to confine an inmate for six days in two cells – one, which “was covered, nearly floor to ceiling in massive amounts of feces,” and another, which was “frigidly cold” and required the inmate to sleep naked on a sewage-covered floor (quotation omitted)); *Camreta v. Greene*, 563 U.S. 692, 728 (2011) (Kennedy, J., dissenting) (“That rule permits clearly established violations to be found when extreme though unheard-of actions violate the Constitution.”).

For conduct that becomes viewed as cruel and unusual by virtue of evolving standards of decency, *Hope* does not apply; rather, case law provides the notice of the updated reach of the Eighth Amendment, as it typically does for qualified immunity. *See Ashcroft v. al-Kidd*, 563 U.S. 731, 741 (2011) (explaining that case law must provide notice such that it places the constitutional violation “beyond debate”); *Montemuro v. Jim Thorpe Area Sch. Dist.*, 99 F.4th 639, 645 (3d Cir. 2024) (“A right is clearly established if the case law at the time of the alleged violation of the right would have put government officials on fair notice that their conduct violated the plaintiff’s rights.” (emphasis added)). Any other approach would impermissibly deny qualified immunity to § 1983 defendants without first providing them with notice of the evolved nature of the Eighth Amendment’s protections. *See Ziglar v. Abbasi*, 582 U.S. 120, 150–51 (2017) (explaining “[t]he doctrine of qualified immunity gives officials ‘breathing room to make reasonable but mistaken judgments about open legal questions.’” (quoting *Al-Kidd*, 563 U.S. at 743)).

In short, because it does not rely on the 2014 Letter as evidence that placing a death-row inmate with a history of mental illness in solitary confinement has always constituted cruel and unusual punishment, the Majority Opinion misuses the 2014 Letter in its efforts to defeat qualified immunity.

² I also would affirm the judgment against Williams's claim under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act because Williams has conceded that he is entitled to only compensatory damages for his Title II claim and despite having the opportunity to do so through supplemental briefing, Williams has not produced evidence of a physical injury in connection with his exclusion from a service, program, or activity, yet the Prison Litigation Reform

* * *

For these reasons, I respectfully dissent from the denial of qualified immunity, and I would affirm the judgment of the District Court in all respects.

Act bars statutory claims that are not accompanied by such a physical injury, see 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(e) (“No Federal civil action may be brought by a prisoner confined in a jail, prison, or other correctional facility, for mental or emotional injury suffered while in custody without a prior showing of physical injury or the commission of a sexual act (as defined in section 2246 of Title 18).”); see also *Mitchell v. Horn*, 318 F.3d 523, 534 (3d Cir. 2003) (holding that 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(e) requires a “less-than-significant-but-more-than-de minimis physical injury”); *but cf.* *Allah v. Al-Hafeez*, 226 F.3d 247, 252 n.5 (3d Cir. 2000) (explaining, in the context of an alleged violation of a constitutional right (but not a statutory right), that the PLRA’s physical injury requirement may not bar claims for nominal and punitive damages). Although the Majority Opinion does not affirm the District Court’s rejection of Williams’s Title II claim on that alternative ground, as it could, see *TD Bank N.A. v. Hill*, 928 F.3d 259, 270 (3d Cir. 2019), nothing about the opinion precludes the District Court from rejecting Williams’s Title II claim on that basis on remand.

APPENDIX B

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
PENNSYLVANIA

ROY LEE WILLIAMS,	:	CIVIL ACTION
Plaintiff	:	NO. 21-1248
	:	
	:	
v.	:	
	:	
JOHN E. WETZEL, et al.,	:	
Defendants.	:	

M E M O R A N D U M

EDUARDO C. ROBRENO, J. July 21, 2022

I. INTRODUCTION

This is a pro se prisoner civil rights action. Plaintiff Roy Williams (“Plaintiff”) brings this action against Defendant John E. Wetzel, the former Secretary of Corrections, in his individual capacity and against Defendant George Little¹ in his official capacity as the Secretary of the Department of Corrections (collectively, “Defendants”), alleging Defendants violated the Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”) and Plaintiff’s Eighth Amendment rights. Plaintiff contends that his placement in indefinite solitary

¹ Plaintiff’s ADA claim was originally brought against John Wetzel in his official capacity as the Secretary of Corrections. Since Plaintiff filed suit, Wetzel retired from his position as the Secretary of Corrections and George Little has become the acting Secretary of Corrections. Pursuant to Federal Rule of Procedure

confinement following his conviction for capital murder violated his rights in light of his history of depression and suicidal ideation.

Defendants have filed a motion for summary judgment. For the following reasons, the Court will grant Defendant's motion.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Plaintiff's Conviction and Mental Health History

In 1992, Plaintiff was convicted of murder in Pennsylvania state court and sentenced to death.² Following his conviction, Plaintiff was placed in custody at the State Corrections Institution Graterford ("SCI-Graterford"). In the mid-1990's, Plaintiff was transferred to the State Corrections Institution Greene ("SCI-Greene") and in July 2020, he was transferred to the State Corrections Institution Phoenix ("SCI-Phoenix"). Plaintiff has since remained at SCI-Phoenix.

In 1979, over a decade before his conviction, Plaintiff was involuntarily committed to the Philadelphia Psychiatric Center (the "PPC") for approximately 60 days after making suicidal threats and exhibiting violent behavior towards his family.

25(d), any official capacity claims should be deemed to be against the acting official. Accordingly, the Court has deemed Plaintiff's ADA claim to be against George Little in his official capacity as the Secretary of Corrections. *See* Ords., ECF Nos. 32-33.

² Plaintiff has since appealed his conviction and sought to obtain postconviction relief. Plaintiff's appeals have not been successful and his capital sentence remains in place.

Plaintiff was diagnosed with depression and suicidal ideation. The PPC also noted that Plaintiff's "most striking problem was the control of his angry feelings." Defs.' Statement of Material Facts ("SOMF") ¶ 41 (internal quotation marks and citation omitted). After his release from the PPC, Plaintiff was voluntarily committed for an additional 90 days, though it is not apparent if he received any other diagnoses at that time.

Plaintiff's mental health was again evaluated after his conviction. In 1996, Plaintiff's criminal defense attorney hired two external mental health professionals, Barry Crown Ph.D and Robert A. Fox, M.D., to conduct clinical examinations of Plaintiff. In September 1996, following their evaluations of Plaintiff, both Dr. Crown and Dr. Fox prepared declarations with their reports.³ Dr. Crown indicated that Plaintiff suffers from "cerebral dysfunction" and "brain damage." Ex. A., ECF No. 2-1 at 48-49 ¶¶ 3-4. Dr. Crown also noted that records from Plaintiff's 1979 involuntary commitment at the PPC "are consistent with [Plaintiff's] brain damage and psychological impairments, and show that he suffered from these impairments from an early age." *Id.* at 49 ¶ 6. Dr. Crown explained that Plaintiff has "neuropsychological and psychological deficiencies" which include "emotional problems and cognitive dysfunction." *Id.* at 50 ¶ 8. In his declaration, Dr. Fox noted that Plaintiff has "ingrained psychological and emotional impairments" including depression and suicidal ideation. *Id.* at 53 ¶ 3; 55 ¶ 9.

³ Plaintiff initially attached these declarations to his Complaint. As Plaintiff refers to these declaration in response, the Court has considered them here.

It is not clear whether Dr. Crown and/or Dr. Fox provided copies of their declarations to the Department of Corrections (the “DOC”). Since his conviction, Plaintiff has been housed in the Capital Case Unit (the “CCU”). Plaintiff’s placement and treatment in the CCU at SCI-Graterford and SCI-Greene were governed by the DOC’s policy concerning Capital Case Administration. When inmates enter the CCU they are given a psychological evaluation “to screen for intellectual, personality, and emotional stability.” Defs.’ SOMF ¶ 18. “[A]ny inmate with evidence of mental illness receives a more comprehensive assessment” and subsequent mental health treatment. Defs.’ SOMF ¶ 20. While Plaintiff was at SCI-Graterford and SCI-Greene, psychology staff visited inmates in the CCU at least five times per week to assess inmates for risk of suicide. See Defs.’ SOMF ¶ 23. Inmates were additionally able to request appointments to speak with mental health professionals. *Id.* Any CCU inmates showing signs that they may harm themselves or others were referred to the mental health department for evaluation. The record shows that Plaintiff was never diagnosed with a mental illness or mental impairment by an internal DOC staff member.

Plaintiff has provided summaries of his DOC mental health records.⁴ The summaries show that in

⁴ Plaintiff did not provide the original mental health records. Instead, Plaintiff filed a motion to supplement his response and included summaries of the mental health records prepared by his counsel at the Defender Association of Philadelphia. See Mot., ECF No. 28. As Defendants have not opposed Plaintiff’s motion to supplement, the Court has relied on the summaries of the records here.

January 1996, Plaintiff was referred to an internal psychiatrist but did not show any signs of “mental decomposition or emotional problems.” See Ex. A, ECF No. 28. On July 3, 1996, Plaintiff was referred to DOC mental health professionals following a suicide attempt. *Id.* According to Plaintiff’s deposition testimony, while at SCI-Graterford, he attempted to commit suicide while in the CCU and was placed in a psychiatric observation cell for mental health professionals to monitor and evaluate him. Plaintiff was evaluated for 48-72 hours and “was released after he told doctors that he faked the suicide attempt to get out of his cell to make a phone call.” Defs.’ SOMF ¶ 31. Plaintiff testified that he did not fake the attempt but was “telling [the mental health professionals] anything just to get out of the cell” Pl. Dep. 25:14-15, ECF No. 24-1. The mental health professionals, believing Plaintiff’s claim, deemed Plaintiff “not depressed” and, in their records, noted that Plaintiff was attempting to “manipulate the system.” See Ex. A, ECF No. 28. Plaintiff did not personally request additional treatment from mental health professionals after that incident and “dealt with everything on [his] own.” Pl. Dep. 25:22-23. Whenever he interacted with the mental health staff, Plaintiff would inform the staff he was feeling fine.

In 2008, Plaintiff was referred to mental health staff for out-of-cell appointments following an incident in which Plaintiff suffered a case of heat exhaustion and developed headaches. Plaintiff was seen by two mental health professionals on five separate occasions. There is no evidence in the record showing that these mental health professionals diagnosed Plaintiff with a mental illness. Plaintiff did not receive assistance from mental health professionals on any other occasion.

Additionally, Plaintiff does not believe that he was ever diagnosed with a mental illness by a DOC professional while in the CCU. Pl. Dep. 36:13- 16.

**B. The Solitary Confinement Class Action
and Updated DOC Policies**

In January 2018, a class action lawsuit was filed in the Middle District of Pennsylvania on behalf of CCU inmates alleging that the conditions in the CCU amounted to “solitary confinement” in violation of the inmates’ Eighth and Fourteenth Amendment rights. See Reid v. Wetzel, No. 18-0176 (M.D. Pa.). In November 2019, the parties executed a settlement agreement in which the DOC agreed to implement a policy creating more socialization opportunities for CCU inmates (the “Reid Settlement”). See Ex. D, ECF No. 24-4.

Following the Reid Settlement, on December 3, 2019, the DOC issued a new policy reflecting updated conditions for CCU confinement. See Ex. E, ECF No. 24-5. The new CCU policy took effect on December 10, 2019. Defendants aver that SCI-Greene began updating its internal policy with respect to CCU confinement as early as March 12, 2018, which allowed SCI-Greene to increase socialization opportunities for CCU inmates. Defs.’ SOMF ¶¶ 10-12. Plaintiff does not recall the date in which these policy changes were implemented at SCI-Greene, but Plaintiff remembers that the official DOC policy outlining changes to CCU confinement was issued on December 3, 2019. See Pl. Dep. 12:1-9.

C. Plaintiff's Grievances

Following the Reid Settlement, Plaintiff filed three grievances in connection with his treatment in the CCU. Plaintiff filed his first grievance on November 13, 2020,⁵ after he was transferred to SCI-Phoenix, claiming that he has a mental disability that has been exacerbated by his prolonged isolation in the CCU (Grievance No. 898857) (the “first grievance”). Plaintiff filed his second grievance on November 30, 2020 making the same claims but adding more details about his mental health history (Grievance No. 902000) (the “second grievance”). Plaintiff filed his third grievance on February 24, 2021, again making the same claims but adding more information about his mental health (Grievance No. 916331) (the “third grievance”).

The DOC has a policy that applies to inmate grievances. Under the policy, “an inmate must file a grievance within 15 working days after the event upon which the claim is based.” Defs.’ SOMF ¶ 51 (internal quotation marks and citation omitted). After receiving a response, “the inmate may file an appeal within 15 working days to the Facility Manager” where the inmate is housed. *Id.* ¶ 52. Following receipt of the Facility Manager’s appeal, the inmate may file a final review appeal to the Secretary’s Office of Inmate and Grievance Appeals (the “SOIGA”). If an inmate appeals to SOIGA, the inmate is required to include all relevant documentation with the appeal. *Id.* ¶ 54.

⁵ During his deposition, Plaintiff recalled filing his first grievance in December, but the DOC’s records indicate this grievance was filed on November 13, 2020. See Ex. H, ECF No. 24-8 at 9.

On February 17, 2021, SOIGA issued a final appeal decision notice dismissing Plaintiff's first grievance due to Plaintiff's failure to provide SOIGA with all required documentation. On March 15, 2021, SOIGA issued a final appeal notice dismissing Plaintiff's second grievance due to Plaintiff's untimely filing of the grievance beyond the 15-day deadline. On April 20, 2021, SOIGA issued a notice regarding Plaintiff's third grievance indicating that plaintiff failed to submit an appeal or indicate what action Plaintiff sought from SOIGA.

D. Procedural History

On March 3, 2021, Plaintiff filed this action. Plaintiff brought claims under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 alleging that Defendant Wetzel, in his official capacity, violated Plaintiff's Eighth and Fourteenth Amendment rights and an individual capacity claim under Title II of the ADA. In April 2021, the Court entered an order dismissing Plaintiff's Fourteenth Amendment claims with prejudice. See Ord. ¶ 5, ECF No. 7. The Court's order dismissed the official capacity Eighth Amendment claim against Defendant Wetzel, but permitted Plaintiff to proceed with an individual capacity Eighth Amendment claim against Defendant Wetzel. Id. The Court has also deemed the ADA claim to be against the acting Secretary of Corrections in his official capacity. See Ord. ¶ 3, ECF No. 29. The acting Secretary of Corrections is George Little. Accordingly, the remaining claims are: (1) an Eighth Amendment claim under section 1983 against Defendant Wetzel in his individual capacity and (2) an ADA claim against Defendant Little in his official capacity. Defendants have filed a motion for summary judgment. Plaintiff

has since responded and the motion is now ripe before the Court.⁶

III. LEGAL STANDARD

Summary judgment is “appropriate only when ‘there is no genuine dispute as to any material fact and the movant is entitled to judgment as a matter of law.’” Physicians Healthsource, Inc. v. Cephalon, Inc., 954 F.3d 615, 618 (3d Cir. 2020) (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 56(a)). A fact is material “if it ‘might affect the outcome of the suit under the governing law.’” Id. (quoting Anderson v. Liberty Lobby, Inc., 477 U.S. 242, 248 (1986)). A factual dispute is genuine “if the ‘evidence is such that a reasonable jury could return a verdict for the nonmoving party.’” Id. (quoting Anderson, 477 U.S. at 248).

The moving party bears the initial burden of showing the absence of a genuine issue of material fact. If the movant meets this obligation, the nonmoving party must “set forth specific facts showing that there is a genuine issue for trial.” Anderson, 477 U.S. at 250. At the summary judgment stage, the Court must view the facts “in the light most favorable to” the nonmoving party and “draw all reasonable inferences in favor” of

⁶ Pursuant to the Court’s scheduling orders, Defendant was granted leave to depose Plaintiff by December 13, 2021 and to file a motion for summary judgment by January 28, 2022. See Ord., ECF Nos. 18, 21. The Court’s Second Scheduling Order provided that if Defendant files a motion for summary judgment, Plaintiff may respond or submit an affidavit pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 56(d) indicating that he is unable to present facts essential to justify his opposition and additional discovery is needed. See Ord., ECF No. 21. Plaintiff submitted a response to Defendants’ motion and did not indicate that additional discovery is needed. Accordingly, Defendants’ motion is ripe for disposition.

that party. Young v. Martin, 801 F.3d 172, 174 n.2 (3d Cir. 2015).

A document filed pro se is to be “liberally construed” and “a pro se complaint, however inartfully pleaded, must be held to less stringent standards than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers.” Erickson v. Pardus, 551 U.S. 89, 94 (2007) (quoting Estelle v. Gamble, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976)). In addition, when considering a motion in a pro se plaintiff’s proceedings, a court must “apply the applicable law, irrespective of whether a pro se litigant has mentioned it by name.” Holley v. Dep’t of Veteran Affairs, 165 F.3d 244, 247–48 (3d Cir. 1999). However, on a motion for summary judgment, “a pro se plaintiff is not relieved of his obligation under Rule 56 to point to competent evidence in the record that is capable of refuting a defendant’s motion for summary judgment.” Ray v. Fed. Ins. Co., No. 05-2507, 2007 WL 1377645, at *3 (E.D. Pa. May 10, 2007) (Robreno, J.). “[M]erely because a non-moving party is proceeding pro se does not relieve him of the obligation under Rule 56(e) to produce evidence that raises a genuine issue of material fact.” Boykins v. Lucent Techs., Inc., 78 F.Supp.2d 402, 408 (E.D. Pa. 2000) (Robreno, J.).

IV. DISCUSSION

Defendants move for summary judgment arguing that (A) the action should be dismissed because Plaintiff has failed to exhaust his administrative remedies, (B) Plaintiff’s claims are barred by the statute of limitations, (C) Defendant Wetzels is protected by qualified immunity, and (D) Plaintiff cannot point to evidence to support his ADA claim

against Defendant Little.⁷ These arguments will be addressed in turn.

A. Exhaustion of Administrative Remedies

Defendants first argue that Plaintiff's claims must fail because Plaintiff failed to exhaust the administrative remedies available to him under the Prison Litigation Reform Act (the "PLRA"). The PLRA provides that "[n]o action shall be brought with respect to prison conditions under section 1983 of this title, or any other Federal law, by a prisoner confined in any jail, prison, or other correctional facility until such administrative remedies as are available are exhausted." 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(a) (amended by Pub. L. 104-134, Title I, §101(a), 110 Stat. 1321-71 (1996)) (emphasis added). A prisoner must also exhaust administrative remedies for claims brought under the ADA. *See Cobb v. Weyandt*, 359 F. App'x 285, 287 (3d Cir. 2009) (noting that the district court properly rejected the argument that administrative exhaustion was unnecessary for claims brought under the ADA). "Exhaustion is mandatory in cases covered by the PLRA." *Dawson v. Cook*, 238 F. Supp. 3d 712, 718 (E.D. Pa. 2017) (Robreno, J.) (citing *Porter v. Nussle*, 534 U.S. 516, 524, 532 (2002)).

Failure to exhaust administrative remedies is an affirmative defense which Defendants have the burden of pleading and proving. *Rinaldi v. United States*, 904 F.3d 257, 268 (3d Cir. 2018) (citing *Ray v. Kertes*, 285

⁷ Defendants also argue that Plaintiff's Fourteenth Amendment claim fails. *See* Defs.' Mot. at 15-20, ECF No. 23. Because the Court already dismissed this claim with prejudice, *see* Ord. ¶ 5, ECF No. 7, the Court need not address this argument here.

F.3d 287, 295 (3d Cir. 2002)); see also Brown v. Croak, 312 F.3d 109, 111 (3d Cir. 2002) (same). “[O]nce the defendant has established that the inmate failed to resort to administrative remedies, the onus falls on the inmate to show that such remedies were unavailable to him.” Rinaldi, 904 F.3d at 268 (citing Tuckel v. Grover, 660 F.3d 1249, 1253 (10th Cir. 2011)).

“[T]o properly exhaust administrative remedies prisoner must ‘complete the administrative review process in accordance with the applicable procedural rules.’” Jones v. Bock, 549 U.S. 199, 218 (2007) (quoting Woodford v. Ngo, 548 U.S. 81, 88 (2006)). Such rules are “defined not by the PLRA, but by the prison grievance process itself.” Id. “Proper exhaustion demands compliance with an agency’s deadlines and other critical procedural rules because no adjudicative system can function effectively without imposing some orderly structure on the course of its proceedings.” Woodford, 548 U.S. at 90-91. To complete the process, the inmate-plaintiff must substantially comply with the prison’s grievance procedure. Small v. Camden Cnty., 728 F.3d 265, 272 (3d Cir. 2013); Spruill v. Gillis, 372 F.3d 218, 232 (3d Cir. 2004). The inmate-plaintiff is barred from bringing suit if he fails to properly pursue his grievance through the prescribed process. Spruill, 372 F.3d at 231-32; Potts v. Holt, No. 09-1805, 2010 WL 2080106, at *6 (M.D. Pa. Apr. 8, 2010).⁸

⁸ In fact, the Third Circuit has noted that policy considerations favor strictly enforcing these exhaustion requirements. These considerations include:

(1) avoiding premature interruption of the administrative process and giving the agency a chance to discover and correct its own errors; (2) conserving scarce judicial resources, since the complaining party may be successful in vindicating his rights in the administrative process and the courts may never have to

The DOC has a policy, DC-ADM-804, which sets forth specific instructions for filing prisoner grievances. Defendants argue that Plaintiff failed to exhaust his administrative remedies because he did not submit his grievances by the requisite deadline. DC-DM-804 requires that inmates submit their grievance to the Facility's Grievance Coordinator/Designee within 15 days of when the claim is based. See Ex. I, DC-ADM-804, § 1.A.8, ECF No. 24-9. Defendants contend that Plaintiff's claims are based on conditions he experienced in the CCU before SCI-Greene relaxed its policies on March 12, 2018, so Plaintiff must have filed his grievance within 15 days of March 12, 2018; alternatively, Plaintiff's grievances must have been filed within 15 days of December 3, 2019, the date when the DOC implemented the new CCU policy with respect to solitary confinement.

Here, Plaintiff's first grievance did not specify a time period for Plaintiff's complaints. In his grievance, Plaintiff generally complained that "his mental disability has [been] exacerbated due to the effects of prolonged isolation." See Ex. H, ECF No. 24-8 at 9. Though Plaintiff testified that he acknowledged the new CCU policy was implemented on December 3, 2019, it is not clear if Plaintiff believes the alleged violations ended on that date. See Pl. Dep: 12:1-24; 13:1; 54:8-13. Additionally, the DOC did not dismiss Plaintiff's first grievance for failing to comply with the

intervene; and, (3) improving the efficacy of the administrative process. Each of these policies, which Congress seems to have had in mind in enacting the PLRA, is advanced by the across-the-board, mandatory exhaustion requirement in § 1997e(a). *Nyhuis v. Reno*, 204 F.3d 65, 75 (3d Cir. 2000).

15-day deadline. Thus, the Court finds that Defendants have not met their burden of showing Plaintiff failed to exhaust his administrative remedies here.

Defendants also argue that Plaintiff failed to exhaust his administrative remedies with respect to the first grievance because Plaintiff did not properly appeal the first grievance to SOIGA. As noted, if an inmate's initial grievance is rejected, the inmate may appeal it to the Facility Manager/Designee "within 15 working days from the date of the initial review response/rejection." Ex. I, DC-ADM-804, § 2.A.1, ECF No. 24-9.

Plaintiff's first grievance was rejected because the Facility Grievance Coordinator found that Plaintiff was not "personally affected by a Department or facility action or policy." Ex. H ECF No. 24-8 at 10. Plaintiff appealed the initial rejection to the Facility Manager and it was again rejected because Plaintiff was not "personally affected by a Department or facility action or policy." Id. at 11. Consistent with DC-ADM-804, Plaintiff then appealed the dismissal to SOIGA. See Ex. I. at §§ 2.B.1.b; 2.B.1.i, ECF No. 24-9.

An appeal to SOIGA must include the following documents:

- (1) a legible copy of the Initial Grievance;
- (2) a copy of the initial review response/rejection and/or remanded initial review response/rejection;
- (3) a legible copy of the Inmate Appeal to the Facility Manager;
- (4) a copy of the Facility Manager/designee's decision and/or remanded Facility Manager/designee's decision;

- (5) a written appeal to the SOIGA;
- (6) failure to provide any of the documentation noted above may result in the appeal being dismissed; and
- (7) the copies of the initial review response/rejection and the Facility Manager/designee's decision cannot be handwritten.

Id. at § 2.B.1.k.

Plaintiff's appeal to SOIGA was dismissed as incomplete because Plaintiff failed to provide the requisite documentation. Plaintiff specifically failed to provide "a legible copy of [the] appeal to [the] Facility Manager." See Ex H, ECF No. 24-8 at 8. The record shows that on January 4, 2021, a notice was issued to Plaintiff indicating Plaintiff was directed to provide all completed documents necessary within 15 working days of the notice and "[a] failure to provide the missing information (identified [in the notice]) within this time period may result in a dismissal of [the] appeal." Id. The record shows that on January 11, 2021, Plaintiff responded and included legible copies of his appeal to the Facility Manager. Id. at 6-7. Despite this, on January 19, 2021, Plaintiff received another notice indicating that his appeal was defective because he had not provided legible copies of his appeal to the Facility Manager. Id. at 5. Plaintiff did not respond, and on February 17, 2021, his grievance was dismissed.

It seems there was an error on the part of SOIGA as Plaintiff did in fact submit a copy of the required documents on January 11, 2021. See id. at 6-7. It is not apparent why SOIGA did not consider Plaintiff's submission and subsequently dismissed Plaintiff's appeal, but it appears that Plaintiff otherwise complied with the appeals process. Thus, the Court finds that Defendants have not met their burden of showing Plaintiff failed to exhaust his administrative remedies⁹ and finds that Defendants are not entitled to summary judgment on this ground.¹⁰

B. Statute of limitations

Defendants next argue that Plaintiff's claims are barred by the statute of limitations. "Because 42 U.S.C. § 1983 does not contain a statute of limitations, courts look to 42 U.S.C. § 1988, which requires use of the statute of limitations for the state where the federal

⁹ Plaintiff contends that grievance procedures were not available to him because the policy provides that "issues concerning . . . the reasons for placement in administrative custody will not be addressed through the Inmate Grievance System" and must be addressed through DC-ADM-802, the policy governing "Administrative Custody procedures." Ex. I, DC-ADM-804, § 1.A.7, ECF No. 24-9. The Court need not reach this argument. Because Defendants have not met their burden of proving Plaintiff failed to exhaust his administrative remedies, the burden does not shift to Plaintiff to show the remedies were not available to him. Rinaldi, 904 F.3d at 268.

¹⁰ Defendants also argue that Plaintiff failed to exhaust his administrative remedies with respect to the second and third grievances. However, the Court need not reach these arguments. Plaintiff has still preserved his claims because all three grievances address the same underlying issues—all three allege that Plaintiff has mental disability that was exacerbated by his prolonged isolation in the CCU.

court sits, unless its application would conflict with the Constitution or with federal law.” Jackson v. Se. Pa. Transp. Auth., 260 F.R.D. 168, 183 (E.D. Pa. 2009) (quoting Lake v. Arnold, 232 F.3d 360, 368 (3d Cir. 2000)). Courts typically apply the underlying state’s statute of limitations for personal injury claims to determine the statute of limitations for section 1983 claims. Sameric Corp. of Delaware, Inc. v. City of Philadelphia, 142 F.3d 582, 599 (3d Cir. 1998); Padilla v. Twp. of Cherry Hill, 110 F. App’x 272, 276 (3d Cir. 2004); Jackson, 260 F.R.D. at 183. Under Pennsylvania law, there is a two-year statute of limitation for personal injury actions, see 42 Pa. C.S. § 5524, so “the same two-year period is applicable to Plaintiff’s section 1983 claims.” Jackson, 260 F.R.D. at 183. Courts apply this statute of limitations to ADA claims as well. See Disabled in Action of Pa. v. Se. Pa. Transp. Auth., 539 F.3d 199, 208 (3d Cir. 2008).

“A section 1983 cause of action accrues when the plaintiff knew or should have known of the injury upon which its action is based.” Sameric, 142 F.3d at 599. The same is true for cases arising under the ADA, but for ADA cases, “the focus is on when the discriminatory act occurs, not when the consequences of the act become painful.” Bukhart, 70 F. App’x at 53 (quoting Chardon v. Fernandez, 454 U.S. 6, 8 (1981)).

A statute of limitations may be tolled under the continuing violations doctrine. “[W]hen defendant’s conduct is part of a continuing practice, an action is timely so long as the last act evidencing the continuing practice falls within the limitations period; in such an instance, the court will grant relief for the earlier related acts that would otherwise be time barred.” Cowell v. Palmer Twp., 263 F.3d 286, 292 (3d Cir. 2001)

(quoting Brenner v. Local 514, United Bhd. of Carpenters and Joiners of Am., 927 F.2d 1283, 1295 (3d Cir. 1991)). Under the doctrine, “equity demands that so long as the most recent offensive utterance or adverse action occurred within the limitations period, the entire scope of that continuing violation may be considered.” Tearpock-Martini v. Borough of Shickshinny, 756 F.3d 232, 236 (3d Cir. 2014) (citation omitted).

“In order to benefit from the doctrine, a plaintiff must establish that the defendant’s conduct is more than the occurrence of isolated or sporadic instances.” Cowell, 263 F.3d at 292 (quotation marks and citation omitted).¹¹ The Third Circuit has “cautioned, however, that equitable relief from the statutory limitations period is appropriate only where the alleged violation is ‘occasioned by continual unlawful acts, not continual ill effects from an original violation.’” Tearpock, 756 F.3d at 236 (quoting Cowell, 263 F.3d at 293). “Under this doctrine, ‘when a defendant’s conduct is part of a continuing practice, an action is timely so long as the last act evidencing the continuing practice falls within the limitations period.’” Cibula v. Fox, 570 F. App’x 129, 133 (3d Cir. 2014) (quoting Cowell, 263 F.3d at 292).

¹¹ The Third Circuit has held that:

Courts should consider at least three factors: (1) subject matter—whether the violations constitute the same type of discrimination, tending to connect them in a continuing violation; (2) frequency—whether the acts are recurring or more in the nature of isolated incidents; and (3) degree of permanence—whether the act had a degree of permanence which should trigger the plaintiff’s awareness of and duty to assert his/her rights and whether the consequences of the act would continue even in the absence of a continuing intent to discriminate.

Cowell, 263 F.3d at 292.

Here, Defendants do not contest that the doctrine applies. Instead, Defendants argue that even when applying the doctrine, Plaintiff has brought his claims outside of the requisite limitations period. Defendants argue that because Plaintiff's claims relate to the isolation policies at the CCU, and because officials at SCI-Greene began loosening restrictions related to CCU inmates early as March 12, 2018, the last act evidencing continuous practices was March 12, 2018. Defendants aver that because Plaintiff filed his complaint on March 3, 2021, this was past the expiration of the statute of limitations so his claims must be dismissed.

However, Plaintiff testified that his claims relate to his isolation in the CCU from the time of his initial placement in the CCU until, at least, December 3, 2019, when the new DOC policy was issued. Pl. Dep: 12:1-24; 13:1; 54:8-13. Though Defendants point to evidence that SCI-Greene instituted changes in March 2018, see Defs.' SOMF ¶¶ 11-12, Plaintiff maintains that he did not benefit from any policy changes until January 2022. See Pl. Affidavit, ECF No. 27 at 4. Viewing the evidence in the light most favorable to Plaintiff, it is not clear that this was the last act evidencing a continuing practice.

Here, the Court finds that there is a question of fact as to the date of the last act evidencing a continuing practice and declines to grant summary judgment on this ground.

C. Qualified Immunity-Defendant Wetzel

Defendants next argue that Plaintiff's claim alleging violations of Plaintiff's Eighth Amendment rights against Defendant Wetzel must be dismissed because Defendant Wetzel is entitled to qualified immunity.¹²

Qualified immunity shields “government officials performing discretionary functions . . . from liability for civil damages insofar as their conduct does not violate clearly established statutory or constitutional rights of which a reasonable person should have known.” Harlow v. Fitzgerald, 457 U.S. 800, 818, (1982). Government officials are entitled to immunity in their individual capacities unless “[t]aken in the light most favorable to the party asserting the injury . . . the facts alleged show the officer’s conduct violated a constitutional right” and “the right was clearly established” at the time of the alleged constitutional violation. Saucier v. Katz, 533 U.S. 194, 201 (2001).

The Supreme Court has emphasized that “the clearly established right must be defined with specificity.” City of Escondido v. Emmons, 139 S. Ct. 500, 503 (2019). Although this specificity is “particularly important in excessive force cases,” in any type of case in which qualified immunity is raised, the Court must be careful to avoid “clearly established law

¹² Plaintiff brings this claim against Defendant Wetzel in his individual capacity. This defense is “available only for governmental officials when they are sued in their personal, and not in their official, capacity.” Melo v. Hafer, 912 F.2d 628, 636 (3d Cir. 1990) (collecting cases).

at a high level of generality.” *Id.* (quoting Kisela v. Hughes, 138 S.Ct. 1148, 1152 (2018)) (internal quotation marks omitted). “[T]here does not have to be a case directly on point, existing precedent must place the lawfulness of the particular [action] beyond debate.” Dist. of Columbia v. Wesby, 138 S.Ct. 577, 590 (2018) (internal quotation marks and citation omitted). But, “there can be the rare obvious case, where the unlawfulness of the officer’s conduct is sufficiently clear even though existing precedent does not address similar circumstances.” *Id.* (internal quotation marks and citation omitted).

As Defendants point out, the Third Circuit has recently held that in a case where a death row inmate challenged the conditions of his solitary confinement under the Eighth Amendment, DOC officers were entitled to qualified immunity. Porter v. Pennsylvania Dep’t of Corrections, 974 F.3d 431, 450 (3d Cir. 2020). The Third Circuit held that Eighth Amendment rights with respect to conditions of solitary confinement on death row are not “clearly established.” *Id.* at 450-451; see also Johnson v. Pennsylvania Dep’t of Corrections, 846 F. App’x 123, 129 (3d Cir. 2021) (finding that the Third Circuit was bound by its “holding in Porter that the Eighth Amendment right in this context was not clearly established at the time of Porter’s (and Johnson’s) solitary confinement, so the Defendants can assert a qualified immunity defense” at the summary judgment stage). Thus, the Court is bound by Porter here. Accordingly, the Court will grant Defendants’ motion with respect to the section 1983 claim against Defendant Wetzel.¹³

¹³ In response, Plaintiff argues that the defense is waived because Defendants did not raise this as an affirmative defense in their Amended

D. ADA Claim Against Defendant Little

Defendants contend that Plaintiff cannot maintain his ADA claim against Defendant Little in his capacity as the Secretary of Corrections.¹⁴ As a preliminary matter, the claim may be barred by Eleventh Amendment immunity. But, Defendants have not raised this argument or briefed this issue, and it is not necessary for the Court to consider it. “When subject matter jurisdiction is at issue, a federal court is generally required to reach the jurisdictional question before turning to the merits.” In re Hechinger Inv. Co. of Delaware Inc., 335 F.3d 243, 249 (3d Cir. 2003) (Alito, J.) (first citing Steel Co. v. Citizens for a Better Env’t, 523 U.S. 83, 93-93 (1998); then citing Larsen v. Senate of the Commw., 152 F.3d 240, 245 (3d Cir. 1998)). However, the Third Circuit has held that courts are not required to resolve issues related to Eleventh Amendment immunity before proceeding to the merits of a case. Id.; see also, e.g., Lombardo v. Pa. Dep’t of Public Welfare, 540 F.3d 190, 197 n.6 (3d Cir. 2008) (noting that federal courts are not required to raise Eleventh Amendment immunity issues sua sponte). Thus, the Court may consider the merits of Plaintiff’s claim here.

To bring a claim under the ADA, a plaintiff “must demonstrate: (1) he is a qualified individual; (2) with a disability; (3) [who] was excluded from participation in

Answer. Pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 15, the Court has since granted Defendants leave to file a Second Amended Answer. See Ord. ¶ 2, ECF No. 29. On July 12, 2022, Defendants filed a Second Amended Answer and included the defense of qualified immunity. Thus, Plaintiff’s argument is now moot.

¹⁴ As noted, this claim is deemed to be against Defendant Little in his official capacity. See Ord. ¶ 3, ECF No. 29; Ord., ECF No. 33.

or denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or was subjected to discrimination by any such entity; (4) by reason of his disability.” Haberle v. Trozell, 885 F.3d 170, 178-79 (3d Cir. 2018) (quoting Bowers v. Nat’l Collegiate Athletic Ass’n, 475, F.3d 524, 533 n.32 (3d Cir. 2007)) (alterations in original).

Defendants argue that Plaintiff cannot prove the second element of his claim because the record does not show that Plaintiff “has a severe mental illness or intellectual disability.” Defs.’ Mot. at 21, ECF No. 23. Under the ADA, disability is defined as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual,” “a record of such an impairment,” or “being regarded as having such an impairment (as described in paragraph (3))” of the statute. 42 U.S.C. § 12102(1). Without referring to the statute, Defendants seem to argue that there is no evidence that Plaintiff had a qualified disability under the ADA.

Though Defendants acknowledge that Plaintiff was diagnosed with depression and suicidal ideation prior to coming into the custody of the DOC, Defendants aver that Plaintiff did not actively seek treatment from mental health professionals while at the DOC. According to summaries of Plaintiff’s mental health records, in January 1996, Plaintiff was referred to a DOC psychiatrist but did not show any signs of “mental decomposition” or emotional problems. See Ex. A, ECF No. 28. Though Plaintiff maintains he attempted suicide in July 1996, the DOC’s records show that Plaintiff indicated he faked the attempt and the DOC’s mental health staff reported that Plaintiff was “not depressed.” Id. After that incident, Plaintiff did not

seek additional mental health treatment. In fact, Plaintiff does not believe that he was ever diagnosed with a mental illness by a DOC mental health professional. Pl. Dep. 36:13-16.

However, Plaintiff still maintains that DOC staff had record of Plaintiff's diagnoses of depression and suicidal ideation. See Pl. Dep: 15:3-20. In fact, in 1996, Plaintiff was referred by his criminal attorney for evaluation by external mental health professionals. The mental health professionals, Dr. Fox and Dr. Crown, prepared declarations on Plaintiff's behalf and noted that Plaintiff suffers from emotional problems and mental impairments including depression and suicidal ideation. See Ex. A., ECF No. 2-1 at 50 ¶ 8; 53 ¶ 3; 55 ¶ 9. Though it is not clear if/when the DOC staff received these records, there is at least an issue of fact as to whether the DOC had record of Plaintiff's mental health diagnoses.¹⁵ Thus, there is an issue of fact with regard to whether, under the ADA's definition, Plaintiff has a disability.

Regardless, Plaintiff's claim still fails because he cannot show evidence of intentional discrimination. Plaintiff seeks to recover compensatory damages here, a remedy which is not available under the ADA "absent proof of 'intentional discrimination.'" Haberle, 885 F.3d at 181 (quoting S.H. ex rel. Durrell v. Lower Merion Sch. Dist., 729 F.3d 248, 261 (3d Cir. 2013)). To prove intentional discrimination, the plaintiff must show "at least deliberate indifference and to plead deliberate

¹⁵ Plaintiff does not argue that he has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual," or that he was "regarded as having such an impairment." 42 U.S.C. § 12102(1).

indifference, a claimant must allege ‘(1) knowledge that a federally protected right is substantially likely to be violated . . . and (2) failure to act despite that knowledge.’” Id. (quoting Lower Merion Sch. Dist., 729 F.3d at 265) (internal citation omitted).

Defendants contend that there is no evidence that the Secretary of Corrections, or any other DOC staff member, acted with deliberate indifference towards Plaintiff. Plaintiff fails to point to any evidence to contest this argument. Accordingly, Plaintiff cannot maintain his ADA claim, so Defendants’ motion will be granted with respect to this claim.

V. CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the Court will grant Defendant’s motion. An appropriate order follows.

APPENDIX C

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
PENNSYLVANIA**

ROY LEE WILLIAMS,	:	CIVIL ACTION
Plaintiff	:	NO. 21-1248
	:	
	:	
v.	:	
	:	
JOHN E. WETZEL, et al.,	:	
Defendants.	:	

ORDER

AND NOW, this **21st** day of **July, 2022**, after considering Defendants' motion for summary judgment and the response thereto, it is hereby

ORDERED as follows:

1. Plaintiff's motion to supplement the record [ECF No. 28] is **GRANTED** as unopposed;
2. Defendants' motion for summary judgment [ECF No. 23] is **GRANTED** for the reasons stated in the accompanying memorandum.

AND IT IS SO ORDERED.

/s/ Eduardo C. Robreno
EDUARDO C. ROBRENO, J.

APPENDIX D

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
PENNSYLVANIA

ROY LEE WILLIAMS,	:	CIVIL ACTION
Plaintiff	:	NO. 21-1248
	:	
	:	
v.	:	
	:	
JOHN E. WETZEL, et al.,	:	
Defendants.	:	

JUDGMENT

AND NOW, this **21st** day of **July, 2022**, in accordance with the Court's Order of this same date, it is hereby **ORDERED** that **JUDGMENT** is **ENTERED** in favor of Defendants John E. Wetzel and George Little and against Plaintiff Roy Lee Williams.

The Clerk of Court shall mark the case **CLOSED**.

AND IT IS SO ORDERED.

/s/ Eduardo C. Robreno
EDUARDO C. ROBRENO, J.

APPENDIX E

UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE THIRD CIRCUIT

No. 22-2399

ROY L. WILLIAMS,
Appellant
v.
SECRETARY PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF
CORRECTIONS
(D.C. Civ. No. 2-21-cv-01248)

SUR PETITION FOR PANEL REHEARING
AND REHEARING EN BANC

Present: CHAGARES, Chief Judge, JORDAN,
HARDIMAN, SHWARTZ, KRAUSE, RESTREPO,
BIBAS, PORTER, MATEY, PHIPPS,
MONTGOMERY-REEVES, CHUNG, and McKEE*,
Circuit Judges.

The petition for rehearing filed by appellees in the above-entitled case having been submitted to the judges who participated in the decision of this Court and to all the other available circuit judges of the circuit in regular active service, and a majority of the judges of the circuit in regular service not having voted for rehearing, the petition for rehearing by the panel and the Court en banc, is denied.

Judges Hardiman and Phipps would have granted rehearing.

* Judge McKee's vote is limited to panel rehearing only.

BY THE COURT,

s/ Theodore A. McKee

Circuit Judge

Dated: December 9, 2024
kr/cc: All Counsel of Record