

Minnesota Prison Ends “No-Touch” Policy

In an article in [the Star Tribune](#), Liz Sawyer recounts how an inhumane policy at Shakopee women’s prison in Minnesota finally came to an end. The prison’s “no-touch” policy, a policy that the Minnesota Department of Corrections often denied was in place, proscribed all contact between incarcerated people. Women at Shakopee could be punished with time in solitary confinement for gestures as simple as a high-five or a pat on the back.

The National Council is especially proud that one of our Reimagining Communities Fellows, Tonja Honsey, played a critical role in getting this cruel policy changed. No one should be denied something so basic and crucial to human well-being as everyday physical touch.

The policy was designed to prevent nonconsensual sexual contact between incarcerated women. Instead, it caused some women to fear demonstrating basic acts of compassion “because some officers used the policy as an excuse to dole out punishment.” Research has demonstrated the [psychological benefits of basic human touch](#), including decreasing stress levels and providing comfort. The absence of such contact, according to University of Minnesota Professor Rebecca Schlafer, “is really devastating for social and emotional well-being.” Advocates assert that such deprivation “can be especially difficult for women who have recently given birth.” Shakopee’s “no-touch” policy caused one woman to fear solitary confinement for comforting her cellmate who had just left her newborn at the hospital.

While Warden Tracy Beltz denied that women “are sometimes punished for minor touch offenses,” she supports changing the policy. She outlined a new contact policy permitting incarcerated people “to fist bump, shake hands, and give high fives.” Unfortunately, hugs are still only permitted with family visitors (a luxury which “not everyone is lucky enough to have”) because of remaining concerns about inappropriate contact. Nevertheless, these women who have suffered by being denied *any* physical contact for “months or even years” can at least receive some relief with the end of “no-touch.”