

Let Chicago's Anti-Torture Resolution Inspire Your Own City

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By [Margaret Power](#), [Truthout](#) | [Report](#)

In June 2012, the Illinois Coalition Against Torture (ICAT) produced a "How To Guide: Getting an Anti-Torture Resolution Passed in Your City" as a contribution to Torture Awareness Month. The guide is a useful tool for activists in cities across the United States who want to have their city declared a torture-free zone. It offers analysis and suggestions drawn from [ICAT's successful campaign](#) to get an anti-torture resolution passed in Chicago.

The Chicago City Council unanimously approved the resolution and declared Chicago a "torture-free city" in January 2012. In an op-ed in The Chicago Tribune, Sister Benita Coffey, a member of ICAT, explained why the resolution was needed and why more work needed to be done to [end the US government's use of torture](#). The [resolution states](#):

1. The City of Chicago declares that it will not tolerate, support or allow torture to be practiced by its employees or residents.
2. The City of Chicago affirms that all prisoners under city, state or federal governmental control are entitled to have their human rights respected, including their right to be free from torture.
3. The City of Chicago supports the observance of December 10th, International Human Rights Day, as a day to reaffirm that the human rights of all people must be respected and to publicly denounce the practice of torture, wherever it occurs.]



(Photo: [Justin Norman / Flickr](#))

This is the first time that any US city council has voted against the practice of torture on all three levels. Much of the impetus to pass the resolution resulted from the accumulated outrage that many in Chicago felt regarding the Chicago police's torture of black men. From the 1970s to the end of the 1980s, officers under the command of Jon Burge tortured 110 black men in a police station on the south side of Chicago in Area 2. The police employed various methods to torture these men, including placing plastic bags on their heads to threaten suffocation; pushing them against a hot radiator; burning them with cigarettes; and simulating executions. They used the "black box," as they called it, to send electric shocks on men's genitals.

News of these officers' torture first broke about twenty years ago, and in 1989, Andrew Wilson, one of the first men tortured by the Area 2 police, filed a civil suit alleging that he had been tortured. Since that time, Attorney Flint Taylor and attorneys John Stainthorp and Joey Mogul at the civil rights law firm, the People's Law Office in Chicago, have pursued civil cases against the officers who carried out the torture. Burge was found guilty of perjury for denying under oath that he tortured black prisoners in a criminal case brought against him by the US attorney's office in 2010 and sentenced to [four and a half years in prison](#). To date, none of the other officers who tortured prisoners have been brought to trial, let alone convicted.

As the "Guide" details, ICAT conducted a vigorous, multilevel campaign to generate support for the anti-torture resolution. ICAT contacted Alderman Joe Moore, who enthusiastically agreed to sponsor the resolution and steer it through the City Council. He also helped to write the resolution, drawing on his knowledge of City Council politics and what would and would not be likely to pass. For example, when ICAT originally wrote the resolution, the organization included two points that Alderman Moore suggested be deleted. The first one said that the City of Chicago, therefore the taxpayers, should no longer pay Burge's legal expenses or pension. To date, the city has spent \$15.5 million on Burge and other officer's legal defense. Furthermore, in 2011, the police pension board voted to continue paying Burge his [monthly pension of \\$3,000](#). However, Alderman Moore counseled eliminating that point as well as one that demanded that the city pay reparations to the survivors of police torture. ICAT agreed to Moore's suggestions in order to secure passage of the resolution. ICAT also launched a successful petition campaign in favor of the resolution. The goals of the petition were twofold: to obtain a significant number of signatures to present to the City Council and to educate and mobilize people against torture. Initially, ICAT set 500 signatures as its goal. Members of

ICAT circulated the petition online through SignOn.com and with hard copies. They spoke to hundreds of people at outdoor events, rallies and on the street in Chicago, asking them to sign the petition.

Chicago calls itself a world-class city, so ICAT decided that it was important to have people all over the world sign the petition to make Chicago a torture-free city. The group drew on human rights networks, personal acquaintances and social media to distribute the petition far and wide. As a result, hundreds of people from around the world signed the petition.

Mario Venegas is a member of ICAT and a survivor of torture in Pinochet's Chile. He solicited signatures of people who attended Occupy or anti-war demonstrations in Chicago, as well as passersby. Venegas also distributed the petition to Chilean human rights groups and survivors of torture. Eager to join in a campaign to condemn torture and to return the solidarity many of them had received during the Pinochet regime, a large number of Chileans signed the petition and encouraged their friends to do so as well. When the petition drive ended, ICAT and other supporters of the resolution had succeeded in gathering 3,500 signatures, seven times the original goal.

The resolution specifically condemned "being held in prolonged solitary confinement in Illinois prisons in conditions which often lead to physical and psychological breakdown" and classified this practice as a form of torture. Tamms Supermax Prison in southern Illinois is one of the main prisons to which the resolution referred. The prison opened in 1998 and currently holds 198 male prisoners. The men are held in [permanent solitary confinement](#). As [Tamms Year Ten](#), an activist organization that seeks to end the use of long-term solitary confinement at Tamms, writes, the men "never leave their cells except to shower or to exercise alone in a concrete pen. There are no communal activities, jobs or contact visits."

In June 19, 2012, Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn announced plans to close Tamms. Families of prisoners, anti-Tamms activists and the human rights community greeted his decision with rejoicing. Inhabitants of Tamms, the village where the prison is located and members of American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 31, the union that represents the prison personnel, have vociferously expressed their displeasure and anger. On July 10, 2012, AFSCME held a press conference to declare their plans to [work to reverse Governor Quinn's decision](#).

According to Michael Gosch, a member of ICAT, the group's work is not over. "Getting the anti-torture resolution passed is a major first step, but our efforts to end torture are not over. Now we need to make sure that Chicago really is a torture-free zone, that torture really does cease and that the victims and survivors of torture receive reparations for the cruel and not unusual enough punishment they received."

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[MARGARET POWER](#)

Margaret Power is a member of ICAT and a professor of history at the Illinois Institute of Technology. She can be reached at marmacpower1@gmail.com.

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