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Testimony of Andrea Comer
President, Greater Hartford African American Alliance

My name is Andrea Comer, and I'm speaking to you today as President of the Greater Hartford African American Alliance.

I grew up in New York, and have lived in Connecticut for nearly 15 years, most of them in Hartford. I've seen way too many of our young people gunned down, and I've gone to far too many funerals. These lives cut short are mostly battles over turf, and many are tied in some way to drug dealing. My heart has grown heavy and my soul weary as I see our families ripped apart by drugs and drug-related violence.

But there is a frustration that lives inside me as well. It's a frustration grown from the recognition that there are systems in place that keep those who are poor and predominantly of color constantly behind the eight-ball. The disparities are evident -- in education, in the workforce -- but mostly in the criminal justice system.

I'm not a Rhodes scholar, but you don't have to be to know the playing field is not level.

The City of Hartford is 18 square miles, 13 if you take away our parkland. Under the current law, virtually anyone who sells drugs in Hartford is in a Safe School Zone and subject to harsher penalties. Like most urban cities, minorities make up the majority of Hartford's population. So by design, the Safe School law, much like the former crack/cocaine law is a net that's cast to catch more minorities than anyone else.

Some argue that the Justice Policy Institute doesn't have data specific to Connecticut. But are numbers in a report really necessary when you can walk through any of our prisons and see what's happening? African Americans and Latinos make up just 18 percent of the state's population, but we're 80 percent of the prison population. Are we predisposed to criminal behavior? Or are the rules written to put more of us in that circumstance?

Let me be clear: I recognize that the drug trade is an anathema in urban neighborhoods. I know all too well what addiction can do to families. We should not as a friend said make it easier for drug dealers. But I also know that trying to address one of society's ills by perpetuating another is the equivalent of putting a Band-Aid on a stab wound. The truth is, the Safe School Zones law in its current form isn't working. Drugs are still being sold, lives are still being lost and more and more people of color are ending up behind bars for longer periods of time.

We need to address the circumstances that put many of our young people on the street corners, circumstances like lack of job opportunities, inadequate education or the absence of family structure, particularly fathers. We need to be realistic about the way we approach the war on drugs, and work on approaches that truly address the problem.

Most importantly, we need to begin to address those circumstances that make crime and punishment color-coded. Thank you.