

TESTIMONY on Bill 7407
AN ACT CONCERNING OVERSIGHT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION
Also support of Bills 7406 and 2285
Judiciary Committee – April 4, 2004

Our criminal justice reform organization in New Haven, People Against Injustice, asks the Judiciary Committee to vote in favor of several bills: 7407-to create a Prison Oversight Commission, 7406-to change the drug-free zones from 1500 to 200 feet, and 2285-to raise the age of Juvenile in the criminal justice system to 17 years old (and related juvenile justice bills).

The proposal for a Prison Oversight Commission (bill 7407) came from our own organization, so that is the bill on which I will elaborate. We want an alliance of officials and community activists to look at various aspects of CT's prison system and help resolve problems that exist therein. As a grassroots organization, we hear many complaints from the community and from former and current prisoners. Rather than each individual trying to solve a problem on his or her own, it would make sense to look at common problems and try to work them out through recommendations and legislation that would benefit everyone. If a prison friend of mine is not getting the surgery he needs, or can't get into a program or job to make his prison time more worthwhile, or has been on a "waiting list" for 12 years to get his teeth cleaned, or can't call his family members because they can't afford the high cost—he is probably not the only prisoner experiencing these difficulties. In addition, we know that some individuals, both prisoners and their family members, are fearful about lodging grievances within the prison system, but would be comfortable with bringing their concerns to an oversight commission, particularly one that included community members. We think that officials and community people can work together, and that it is very important to include both in oversight of a state agency affecting so many citizens of our state. Over 18,000 individuals are incarcerated in CT and many thousands more are under DOC supervision. Their family members—parents, siblings and children—represent even more thousands of our citizens who are also affected by the prison experience. As the community is paying millions of dollars in taxes to run the prison system, so should they also join in the oversight of it.

Community members would include former prisoners, family members of current or former prisoners, faith community leaders and other community leaders. This would insure a wide range of knowledge and viewpoints, to add to that of legislators, DOC personnel, and designees of the African-American and Latino & Puerto Rican Affairs Commissions.

Some of the areas we think a Commission should look at are:

- Rehabilitation of prisoners
- Educational programs
- Access to legal services
- Preparation of prisoners for reentry into the community
- Prisoner health care and nutrition
- Treatment for drug addiction
- Treatment for mental illness
- Methods of controlling prisoner behavior- tickets, punishments, psychological effects etc
- Relations between corrections officers and prisoners
- Security and safety within the facilities, for both staff and prisoners
- Physical condition of the facilities
- Public safety
- Grievance procedures for both employees and prisoners
- Telephone system and other issues affecting families and friends of prisoners
- Financial appropriations
- Quality of life issues, such as time out of cell, showers, phones, recreation, fresh air, books, commissary, mail
- Money issues, such as co-pays for medical care, commissary prices, wages for jobs
- Drugs in prison
- Supermax prison (Northern C.I.)
- Re-entry policies

Some other bills already on your agenda this session are examples of areas in need of oversight : 6902- Cost of inmate telephone calls, 6987- Services and protection of rights for prisoners w/ mental illness, and 7213- Prohibiting use of dogs in cell extractions.

We believe it is the intention of Department of Correction to make every aspect of the system work as well as possible, and therefore assume that DOC will disclose any relevant information to Commission members about its practices and data on whatever topic is being examined, and we hope they will both participate in and welcome input from this Commission.

I have in my possession a long report from a national conference on prison oversight that was held in April 2006 in Austin TX. It is clear from these materials that only a very few states (Connecticut not included) have any effective independent prison oversight entity at all, other than Protection & Advocacy of people with disabilities, which is federally mandated. I believe CT is often a model in the country, and I want our state to become a model and innovator in the area of prison oversight as well. With over 90% of prisoners eventually returning to our communities, the public has an interest in knowing about and evaluating their prison experience. Are the prisons' policies and programs and their treatment of prisoners likely to bring about rehabilitation of these returnees?

I have given the Judiciary co-chairs some of the materials about oversight in other states, which they can make available to other members of the Committee. You can also contact Professor Michael Mushlin of Pace Law School, from whom I received these materials, who is very knowledgeable on the topic of prison oversight. (contact information below*) As he said to me, "Oversight is essential to pull prisons out of what Justice Brennan called the 'shadow world' in which they exist. It helps serve the cause of democracy by making these very important institutions more open so that the public can know what is occurring in them."

We urge the Judiciary Committee to vote yes on bill 7407 and set up this important Oversight Commission.

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