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PERMANENT COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

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Written Testimony of
The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women
Before the
Judiciary Committee
Wednesday, March 12, 2008

In support of:

HB 5914, AAC Programs and Services for Female Inmates and Ex-Offenders.

HB 5917, AAC a Department of Correction Advisory Commission.

Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to provide written testimony on the above referenced bills on behalf of the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW).

The PCSW has been working with the Department of Correction to address issues that impact women for some time now. We have a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department of Corrections to monitor complaints and investigations; we comment on policies and practices on sexual harassment and affirmative action issues; and, we convene the Women in Prison Workgroup, which is a collaborative effort to address health and medical concerns of inmates, job training, and transition and reentry programs.

HB 5914, AAC Programs and Services for Female Inmates and Ex-Offenders.

Unfortunately, the number of women in prison has increased dramatically in the past decade. In 1990, 595 women were incarcerated in Connecticut. As of January 2006,

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the number of women incarcerated increased over 100% to 1,296 women.¹ Many women are incarcerated due to issues relating to their own poverty and abuse. Some engage in prostitution to support drug habits. Others are victims of domestic violence, incest and sexual assault who may commit crimes related to the abuse or may be living out lives shaped by the history of the violence directed against them.

We strongly support HB 5914, which would provide increased funding for gender-specific divisionary and reentry programs and services for female offenders. Women need services that are gender appropriate and culturally competent, and take into account their specific experiences, especially psychological trauma resulting from sexual or domestic violence. Our current systems for providing treatment to women through the adult criminal justice systems are not sufficiently integrated and rely too heavily on incarceration or other institutional responses when smaller, community-based services would be better. In addition, some providers are not adequately trained to recognize and treat women who are victims of trauma.

Alyssa Benedict, an expert and trainer on this topic, explains that "gender specific systems and services are those that intentionally allow research, knowledge and competency on female development, socialization, risks, strengths, and needs to affect and guide all aspects of system design, system processes, service design and service delivery." A growing body of research and experience has demonstrated that girls and women need "gender-specific" services that take into account their particular experiences and developmental needs. For example, an overwhelming majority of women who enter the criminal justice system have been the victims of sexual or domestic violence; in fact, the report issued by DCF pursuant to Special Act 04-05 notes that girls are three times more likely than boys to have been sexually abused by the age of 18. Girls who have been sexually abused are more likely to experience stress, depression and low self-esteem.² In addition, research demonstrates that women are more likely to thrive in settings where personal relationships are valued and nurtured, and where cultural differences are also respected.

Treatment or responses that do not address the psychological consequences of trauma will not work, and may actually re-victimize the victims. If we do not invest in the necessary training and development of best practices for providing services to women, we will waste state funding and waste the time and effort of those in treatment as they struggle to succeed in programs that do not work.

There is a critical need discharge planning. PCSW conducts workshops at York prison, and we have heard all too often about women serving their full sentence at York without the benefit of supervised parole, transitional supervision or probation and no place to go upon release. They have no families or support systems to return to, or just

¹ CT Department of Correction Statistics, *Incarcerated Population By Status and Gender, and January 1, 2006 Population Statistics*, accessed 3/06 at www.doc.state.ct.us.

² *Plan for a Continuum of Community Based Services for Adolescent Females Involved in the Juvenile Court System*, Department of Children and Families, December 30, 2004, citing various psychological research reports, p. 27

do not want to return to the environment they were in before their incarceration. Women who have been released without a discharge plan often end up in homeless shelters or in situations that lead to their reentry into the prison system. Community supports for inmates, who are released, paroled or on probation will reduce the probability that those released from prison will recycle back into the system. The availability of such support services will not only save the state money, but will also help those who are released to become productive members of society.

HB 5917, AAC a Department of Correction Advisory Commission.

PCSW also supports HB 5917 which would establish an advisory commission to review policies and practices of the Department of Correction and make recommendations concerning such policies and practices, legislation and funding.

We agree that there should be more community involvement in the corrections system to provide a broader experience in developing certain policies. Through our collaborations we have learned that there is a critical need for parity in programs. For example, only male inmates can do roadwork which pays more. The reasoning is that the male inmates are minimum security and the prisons where they are housed are structured to separate minimum versus maximum security. However, since York is the only female prison there is no way to provide a similar separation. We have begun discussions with the Commissioner of Corrections on this issue. Had we not been able to broaden the discussion this issue may have never been raised.

We look forward to working with you to address this issue. Thank you for your consideration.