Testimony for Judiciary Committee public hearing on March 12, 2008

I am testifying in support of HB 5917, **AN ACT CONCERNING A DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION ADVISORY COMMISSION.**

Last year when I mentioned to Chairman Lawlor the idea of a legislator/citizen commission to look at Department of Correction policies and practices, he said, "We're supposed to be doing that!" I assume by "we" he meant the Judiciary Committee. When I see all the different issues Judiciary members have to deal with, it is really an overwhelming job. That is why our organization, People Against Injustice, believes that a special commission needs to be assigned to the task of keeping track of DOC, to give advice and recommendations and draft legislation when deemed necessary, and to report to the General Assembly and the public.

As Judiciary Committee members are undoubtedly aware, Connecticut's current prison population, as of February 15, was 19,690. According to last fiscal year's figures, the average yearly cost of incarcerating one individual was $31,419. With a budget over $700 million, Department of Correction is an agency that qualifies for independent assessment by Legislators as well as the taxpayers who fund it. In addition, organizations which look out for certain segments of CT's population (African Americans, Latinos, women, and persons with disabilities) have an interest in whatever affects their members who are either incarcerated or employed by DOC.

The DOC Advisory Commission described in HB 5917 would provide an opportunity for representatives of all these segments of CT's population mentioned above to work together and with DOC. An official bi-partisan independent body that periodically looks at the policies and practices of important agencies is a good idea. The Department of Correction, the General Assembly and the public would benefit from the information this Commission could provide.

We know that citizens often call on their representatives and other officials when an incarcerated family member is having a problem. I'm sure most of you try to address the problem. But dealing with individual requests for assistance may not be the most effective approach if there are many others requesting help for a similar problem—be it with getting into programs, health care, legal services or some other issue. A Commission would be able to help solve a problem that might impact a large number of individuals.

CT is one of the states that does not have an independent entity that looks at its prison system. If you go to the following website, you could read about one of the states that does have an independent body that includes citizen members, the Correctional Association of New York and its Prison Visiting Project.
http://www.correctionalassociation.org/PVP/PVP_main.htm
Their Committee is composed of members of the staff and board of the Correctional Association, experts in corrections and in medical and mental health care, former prisoners who have completed their parole and concerned citizens. They visit prisons throughout the state and issue reports of findings on conditions to policymakers. Information on other states can be provided to you.

We believe that the Commission proposed in HB 5917 could be a model for the many states that have no such independent body. We believe that the proposed combination of members—from Judiciary Committee, African American and Latino & Puerto Rican Affairs Commissions, Protection & Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities, Commission on the Status of Women, and qualified citizens concerned with the prison system—will be able to work well together to provide a service to our state.

Please give Connecticut the opportunity to create this DOC Advisory Commission.

Sally Joughin

Sally Joughin
People Against Injustice, New Haven
peopleagainstinjust@earthlink.net