

Good afternoon Senator Coleman, Representative Fox, and members of the Judiciary Committee.

My name is Debbie Ward. I am a Licensed Professional Counselor at Northern Correction Institution. I am also nationally-certified as a counselor, and I'm licensed as a registered nurse. I am here to support Senate Bill 367.

In the two years that I've worked at Northern, I've written multiple Disciplinary Reports for Public Indecency. The following incident occurred and represents similar incidents: a Correction Officer called to report that an inmate was requesting mental health services. I was in the office when the call came in. This gave me the opportunity to gather information relevant to the inmate's request from the officer on the phone: What was the inmate's behavior? Had he received bad news during a phone call, a visit, or in a letter? Also, I was able to review the clinical record before walking to the unit. When I got there, I checked in with staff. Then I walked to the inmate's call.

Arriving at the cell door, the inmate was exposed from the waist down, and he was masturbating. The inmate's behavior was publicly indecent, anti-social, violating the norms of society. In the community the inmate's behavior is certainly considered a crime. At Northern, it's entertainment and considered common practice for many inmates. Without meaningful consequences these behaviors continue.

Many inmates turn what is supposed to be a short-term program into a long-term program by habitually receiving Disciplinary Reports for this type of behavior. The current (internal) consequences process does not slow down this behavior for many. Receiving Disciplinary Reports keeps them in Northern for much longer than originally intended. As stated, Northern is not intended to be a long-term building, but for many inmates that engage in this behavior, it becomes long-term, working against the inmate and reducing their chances with transitioning successfully into a less secure facility and their future success in the community. The goal is to keep the inmate from spending unnecessary time in Northern.

In response to publicly indecent behavior—as I mentioned previously—I write a Disciplinary Report. Doing so requires that I document the incident in the clinical record so that other clinical staff are aware of and able to use the information.

I and my colleagues in the Medical and Mental Health Units at Northern Correction Institution support Senate Bill 367 for this type of behavior for the following reasons:

1. We believe that behavior that is deemed criminal in the community should be deemed criminal in the Department of Correction. We believe that this is consistent with the goals of the Department of Correction among which is to prepare inmates for their transition to the community.
2. Inmates who engage in publicly indecent behavior interfere with our ability to do our jobs which is to provide medical and mental health services to those individuals who legitimately need them.
3. We believe that Senate Bill 367 will have a positive impact by reducing the occurrence of Public Indecency in the Department of Correction.
4. Ninety-five per cent of the inmates I work with will return to the community. Most of them do not engage in publicly indecent behavior. For the individuals who do, we hope that Senate Bill 367 will have a carry-over effect to their behavior when they return to the community.
5. Current consequences do not have an adequate deterrent effect.

Thank you for your attention.

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