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Prison Reentry Initiative  
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JOHN DeSTEFANO, JR.  
MAYOR

Testimony of the City of New Haven's Reentry Initiative  
Before the Government Administration and Elections Committee

*Regarding*  
Proposed S.B. No. 774

*Submitted by*  
**Melissa Lavoie, Program Coordinator, City of New Haven Reentry Initiative**  
March 11, 2013

Dear Senator Musto, Representative Jutlia, and members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee,

My name is Melissa Lavoie and I am the Program Coordinator for the City of New Haven's Reentry Initiative. I am also the founder and chair of the Reentry Initiative's *Unlock the Vote* project, a civic engagement campaign focused on New Haven residents with criminal records. And it is with enthusiasm that I support S.B. 774: An Act Concerning the Dissemination of Information Concerning Voting Rights to Persons Being Released from Department of Correction Facilities. By providing people with the opportunity to register to vote at the time they are restored to citizenship, we can empower countless men and women with criminal records who might otherwise believe they cannot exercise this fundamental right.

I have seen firsthand the importance of notification legislation like S.B. 774. In my work with *Unlock the Vote*, I have registered 292 voters and have had hundreds of conversations about voting with individuals who have criminal records. I have organized focus groups and conducted surveys of formerly incarcerated men and women to understand what might prevent them from voting.

Through these experiences, I have met countless people who mistakenly believe that their criminal records will forever bar them from voting. In Connecticut, adult citizens with criminal records may vote as long as they have completed their prison sentence, are not on parole, and have not been convicted of election fraud. Yet when I conducted a survey of nearly 80 individuals with criminal records, a majority incorrectly indicated that a prison sentence meant permanent disenfranchisement. When I registered new voters at the New Haven Probation Office, I heard a constant refrain: "I don't think I can vote because I'm a felon." Moreover, the very people one might turn to for clarification are often mistaken as well; I have met a number of Department of Corrections employees who also believe that former prisoners can never vote. By providing individuals with the opportunity to register to vote upon restoration of citizenship, we can prevent misunderstanding and encourage men and women who would likely see themselves as disenfranchised to share in this civic duty.

It is crucial not only that individuals see information about voting rights upon restoration of citizenship, but that they are also provided with the opportunity to register to vote. Buried in an inmate's discharge paperwork, there is a small copy of the Connecticut statute pertaining to the restoration of electoral privileges upon release from prison. But as I have seen in my hundreds of exchanges with men and women who incorrectly believe they cannot vote, this has not been enough to prevent misunderstanding. We must take the additional step of providing inmates with the opportunity to register to vote as they leave Department of Correction custody.

Voting is essential to reassuming citizenship, and it is in our shared interest for individuals with criminal records to become engaged, responsible citizens. It is in that spirit that I urge you to support S.B. 774. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.