

Testimony of Michelle S. Cruz, Victims' Rights Attorney

There are currently 17 bills targeting RREC to limit or curtail the program. I fought for over 15 months to end this program in regards to violent offenders, such as Frankie Resto, Scott Shefelbine and Kezlyn Mendez. We cannot prevent all harm, but we can eliminate known risks. Violent Offenders are KNOWN RISKS to both our communities and to the crime victims of the underlying crimes. The RREC has three fatal flaws that continue to pose threats to our communities: (1) release of violence offenders who HAD NOT taken part in programming that would target their root criminal behavior or in other words, offenders who were NOT ready to hit the street and to remain free from crime; (2) the RREC Program allowed violent offenders to get out of prison before serving the statutory 85% of their original sentence and broke the promises our courts and prosecutors made to the crime victims and their families of the underlying crime, in some cases placing the victims in danger (For example one unidentified domestic violence victim had planned for a set certain release date of the inmate based upon the promise made by the Courts, prosecutor and the DOC. Unfortunately this same offender was awarded RREC, regardless of NOT participating in any programming. As a direct result this victim's right to be reasonably protected, a state Constitutional right, was violated and the victim had to ditch the original plans for the inmates release and start over every month to plan for the inmates new release which changes monthly); and (3) the offenders in many cases because of the RREC program, were either not placed on parole and supervised or placed on an oversaturated probationary supervision system with little or no accountability, just review the facts of the Fredrick Weller case. Despite the identified threats to our communities and empirical evidence that proved heinous crimes were committed by countless RREC offenders, numerous offenders continue to be released into our communities ill prepared to handle life's daily struggles, which places our communities, crime victims and survivors at great risk for injury and death.

I ask you to pass this bill, curtail RREC to non-violent offenders, and, more importantly, name the bill in honor of Ibrahim Ghazal, who is but one victim of this poorly implemented RREC whose life was cut short. Commissioner Lantz warned individuals in our criminal justice system including Mike Lawlor that poor implementation of a retroactive good time credit or earned credit program could prove to be disastrous to our communities – this warning has become a reality. Similarly I too testified in the Spring of 2012 warning of the great risk of the RREC program and my hopes that the program would be either halted or limited to non-violent offenders, prior to the death of one of Connecticut's own. Unfortunately those pleas fell upon deaf ears.

I would add one extra amendment onto the bill and that would be creation of a high risk domestic violence and gun offender program, complete with strict supervision and community monitoring- a true coordinated community response to high risk offenders when they reenter our communities - a recommendation I have made for a number of years to this very Legislature, in my past role the State Victim Advocate. Recently the high risk offender program for domestic violence offenders has being commended by Vice President Biden, similar to the program I had lobbied for a number of years for which was modeled after the Hamden, Hampshire and Middlesex counties, Massachusetts.