



State of Connecticut

African-American Affairs Commission

State Capitol

210 Capitol Avenue – Room 509

Hartford, CT 06106

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March 13, 2015

Good Morning Senator Coleman, Representative Tong, Ranking Members and other members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Glenn A. Cassis, Executive Director of the African-American Affairs Commission (AAAC). I am submitting this testimony in support of the Governor's bill **S.B. 952, An Act Concerning A Second Chance Society**. The AAAC's mission is to improve and promote the economic development, education, health and political well-being of the African-American community in the State of Connecticut. This bill serves as an opportunity to provide individuals who have paid their debt to society with a chance to be productive members of society.

The War on Drugs was declared in the mid-1980's and continues in many states including Connecticut. It has been a failed policy. For three and a half decades this war has clogged the judicial system, filled prisons with low-level offenders, systematically put people of color in prison (mostly males) and failed to reduce the use and flow of drugs on city streets, suburbs or rural areas. Drug offenses account for more than half of the rise in the prison population in Connecticut between 1985 and 2000¹. Nationally there are nearly a half million inmates in prisons or jails for a drug offense compared to 41,100 in 1980.² Misguided criminalization of drug offenses, mandatory minimum sentences for low level drug offenses and punitive re-entry programs has created a system that has arrested than 31 million people since the mid 1980's the start of the War on Drugs³. A majority of the drug arrests (80%) are for possession and not the more serious offense of sale and distribution. Most inmates in state prisons have no history of violence or significant sale of drugs.⁴ Nevertheless the War on Drugs has marshaled in the harshest penalties for drug arrests and convictions.

Second Chance Society legislation will reclassify drug offenses. This will send fewer non-violent individuals to jail. Possession and use of drugs would be classified as a misdemeanor unless there is intent to sell. Judges will still have discretion to impose a range of sentences based on the circumstances of each individual case but not bound by mandatory minimum sentences.

¹ See Marc Mauer, *Race to Incarcerate*, rev.ed. (New York: The New Press, 2006),33.

² Marc Mauer and Ryan King, *A 25 Year Quagmire: "The War on Drugs" and Its Impact on American Society* (Washington, DC: Sentencing Project, 2007),2

³ Ibid 3

⁴ Mauer and King, *A 25-Year Quagmire*, 2-3

Our Mission

To improve and promote the economic development, education, health and political well-being of the African-American community in the State of Connecticut

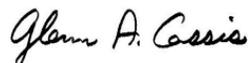
Second Chance Society will streamline parole hearings. The goal will be to reduce the backlogs and make the process more efficient. Creating a hearing process for cases involving low-level, non-violent individuals would streamline the process by giving the Board the option of not requiring the inmate to be present in certain cases related to non-violent and victimless crimes. The Board will have the tools to screen and identify high-risk and/or violent inmates. This has the potential to offer parole at the earliest possible date to inmates who pose less risk to the community.

Receiving a pardon is critical for non-violent ex-offender's road to successful re-entry and employment. Clarifying the expedited pardons process will help ex-offenders have a realistic chance for a full pardon after completing their sentence or probation and several years of good behavior. Having legitimate employment will pave the road to full citizenship (voting rights) and a person who is a productive member of society.

Second Chance Society will strive to expand employment opportunities by providing vocational skills training and adult basic education. The Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) model has demonstrated successful outcomes in Washington state and would be modeled in Connecticut with community partners.

The African-American Affairs Commission understands the importance of the successful passage of Second Chance Society. African-Americans and other people of color are disproportionately represented in state prisons for low-level offenses covered by Second Chance. Second Chance will provide the best path towards solving this racial disparity that exists in the penal system. This legislation will improve our criminal justice system by making it more efficient and in the long run cost effective. The Commission applauds the Governor's bold initiative and urges the Judiciary Committee and the General Assembly to support passage of **S.B. 952**.

Thank you for accepting my testimony.



Glenn A. Cassis
Executive Director