



hispanicfederation

55 Exchange Place, 5th Floor
New York, NY 10005
T. 212 233 8955 F. 212 233 8996

175 Main Street, 2nd Floor
Hartford, CT 06106
T. 860 527 0856 Ext 254 F. 860 724 0437

1133 19th Street N.W., Suite 1035
Washington, DC 20036
T. 202 887 4977 F. 202 833 6135
www.hispanicfederation.org

Ingrid Alvarez, Connecticut State Director, Hispanic Federation
Written Testimony Supporting SB 459 with Changes
The Joint Committee on Judiciary
Connecticut General Assembly
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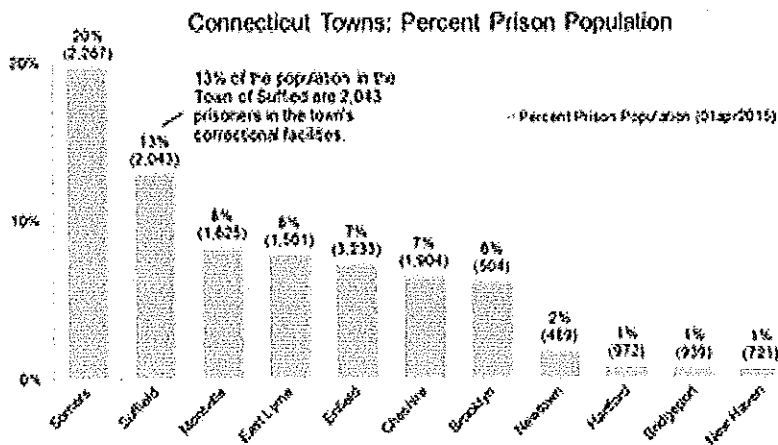
Co-Chairs Coleman and Tong, Ranking Members and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Judiciary thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 459: AN ACT CONCERNING THE COUNTING OF INCARCERATED PERSONS FOR PURPOSES OF DETERMINING LEGISLATIVE DISTRICTS AND DISTRIBUTING STATE AND FEDERAL FUNDS.

My name is Ingrid Alvarez. I am the Connecticut State Director of the Hispanic Federation. Hispanic Federation is the nation's premier Latino membership organization with a mission to advance and empower the Hispanic community locally and nationally. We represent 100 local community-based organizations that empower and advance the aspirations and needs of the Hispanic community by improving educational achievement, increasing financial stability, strengthening Latino nonprofits, promoting healthy communities, and giving voice to our community.

The basis and foundation of our democratic form of government is the right to vote. The Hispanic Federation is committed to the principle that every citizen has the right to equally and fully participate in the electoral process. In the last 50 years we have made significant progress on voting rights. Unfortunately, many Americans, in particular Latinos and language minorities, are effectively denied their right to vote.

Our communities are constantly changing. With those changes come demographic shifts that need to be properly represented in the way our district lines are drawn, so as not to disenfranchise any voting bloc. The act of prison gerrymandering too often achieves the opposite goal, further disenfranchising communities, especially those that are majority black and Latino. Our process for redistricting must be fair and empowering rather than serve the interest of maintaining the status quo in power dynamics. Prison gerrymandering is among the most exploitative and unjust processes; we must put an end to it in our state.

The illustration below depicts when drawing political boundaries (both state and federal) in Connecticut, inmates are counted as part of the local town population where their prison is located. Consequently, towns with prisons benefit when inmates are counted for the basis of political representation, but prisoners do not vote. In Somers, **20 percent** (1 in 5) of the town's population is in local prisons and most of these inmates lived in other towns before going to prison. In short, counting inmates for political redistricting increases the influence of towns with prisons and *decreases* the influence of the resident towns where inmates lived before being incarcerated.



Connecticut Dept. of Corrections, April 1st 2015 at <http://www.ct.gov/doc/cwp/view.asp?a=1505&q=482094>

Prisons are not residences and as such counting incarcerated individuals as residents in the prison towns is in direct breach of our state's statute Chapter 143 Electors: Qualifications and Admission Sec. 9-14a. Electors in custody of state that mandates "Any person in the custody of the state being held at a community correctional center or a correctional institution, whose voting rights have not been denied, shall be deemed to be absent from the town or city of which he is an inhabitant for purposes of voting, notwithstanding that such center or institution may be situated within such town or city." (P.A. 75-595, S. 4, 5.)

Prison gerrymandering dilutes the power of our vote within our communities because it disproportionately counts urban Black and Latinos as population living in towns like Enfield, Suffield, Cheshire and Somers. Although these prison towns hold very low percentages of Hispanic residents; they hold astronomical percentage numbers of incarcerated Hispanics thus using prison populations to inflate the populations of the districts that contain prisons and to dilute the political power of everyone else within the urban communities and cities these individuals call home.

Similarly this also affects neighboring districts negatively and producing inequities in communities. When a district that holds a prison inflates voting power through prison gerrymandering it directly impacts and weakens the representation of a neighboring district without a prison.

We support ending prison gerrymandering, but Senate Bill 459 contains language that is not necessary to ending it Connecticut and may cause needless opposition to the bill. We respectfully request the following changes to lines 72 and 73:

From "... basis for (1) determining state assembly and senatorial districts and municipal redistricting, and (2) the distribution of state or federal funds or other benefits."

To: "... basis for determining only state assembly and senatorial districts and municipal redistricting and no other purpose. This data shall not be used in federal, state, and local

funding formulas.”

This alternative language ensures that the prisoner population count is only for purposes of redistricting once every ten years after the national census.

We recognize that drafting legislation to end prison gerrymandering in our state is a complex issue, but it should not deter us from ensuring that Connecticut becomes the next state to join New York, Maryland, Delaware and California and stop this gross injustice.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Ingrid Alvarez
Connecticut State Director
Hispanic Federation