



State of Connecticut

African-American Affairs Commission

State Capitol

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Senator Coleman, Representative Tong and other distinguished members of the judiciary committee.

My name is Subira Gordon and I am the legislative analyst for the African American Affairs Commission. The mission of the African-American Affairs Commission (AAAC) is to improve and promote the economic development, education, health and political well-being of the African-American community in the State of Connecticut. The AAAC is a steering committee member of the CT Fair chance coalition.

I would like to commend the leadership of the Governor to have the insight to create a second chance society in the last legislative session. This committee also played an important role in seeing that vision of the Governor through and as a state we have started to make some changes that will help many individuals particularly those of African descent who have routinely been treated unjustly by the criminal justice system. The public hearing agenda today is filled with bills that if passed will successfully alter the lives of many and given that 1 in 3 African American males will be touched by the criminal justice system, the AAAC supports these measures.

I am here today to provide comment on S.B. No. 18 AN ACT CONCERNING A SECOND CHANCE SOCIETY, S.B. No. 467 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING MUNICIPAL IMPLEMENTATION OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORMS, S.B. No. 469 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING NONVIOLENT MISDEMEANOR DRUG VIOLATIONS OR CONVICTIONS, S.B. No. 470 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING A

PILOT PROGRAM FOSTERING NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY AND CREATING A SET-ASIDE PROGRAM FOR PARTICIPANTS IN THE PILOT PROGRAM, AND AUTHORIZING BONDING FOR RELATED PROJECTS, H.B. No. 5641 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING PROVISIONAL PARDONS and H.B. No. 5642 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE JUVENILE JUSTICE POLICY OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE.

SB 18 AAC a second chance society addresses raising the age for juvenile jurisdiction from 17 to 20 as well as bail reform. There are long term effects that are beneficial to raising the age which will keep many youths outside of the criminal justice system and steered towards the help that they need rather than becoming a statistic. For young African-Americans who have a higher likelihood of being arrested in schools than their white peers, raising the age to 20 will allow them to be treated through the juvenile system rather than as adults in an already racially biased criminal justice system.

For too long many individuals end up sitting in jail for low lying offences because of their inability to make bail. The AAAC supports bail reform as in a society where someone is innocent until proven guilty it only seems fair that they should not be held in jail before being convicted of crime solely based on their financial ability to post bail. Given the already stated racial biases that exist in the criminal justice system bail reform is a necessary next step in the state.

In moving forward with criminal justice reforms the next step is to help these individuals access employment. The AAAC has put together a "fair chance" coalition which includes legislative commissions, the ACLU of Connecticut, the Restaurant Opportunities Center, Planned Parenthood of Southern New England along with various other advocacy and civil rights organizations in the state. As a group we worked together to pass HB 5237 on consent out of the labor committee. Section (2) of SB 467 includes the components of that bill which does two things: 1) removes the criminal record question from applications and requires an employer to do a background check only after a prospective employee has been given a conditional offer similar to a drug

test and; 2) limits the amount of time that employers can use that record as a disqualifier for employment, both of which are instrumental in helping individuals gain access to employment. For many people who have criminal records, even when they do get an interview are then turned down for the job based on the simple fact that they had a criminal history regardless time elapsed since the offense or the nature of the crime. If we are able to give those with a checkered past access to employment, this will change their lives and help to move the economy forward by having everyone have equal access to employment and reducing the likelihood of reliance on the ever shrinking social safety net.

SB 469 automatically erases criminal records for misdemeanor drug convictions after 5 years if the person convicted does not re-offend in that time frame. Erasure of records is really important in helping individuals with drug offenses get out of a life of crime and addiction. A criminal record for many becomes a scarlet letter that haunts them for years and creates barriers to jobs and housing. While the AAAC would like to see a system of automatic erasure for more crimes than single misdemeanors we fully support this effort as it is a step in the right direction.

HB 5641 gives the CT board of pardons and paroles the ability to grant an absolute pardon which seals the records of individuals who are just shy of having all the requirements to be granted a full pardon. Connecticut is one of a few states that does allow for an expungement of criminal records however in practice it is very difficult to get expungement so many people become discouraged with the pardons process, after applying a number of times and end up being denied for reasons beyond their control. The bill also allows a provisional pardon to be converted to an absolute pardon after 5 years if a person has not re-offended. By giving the board another option they will be able to help more people who have proven that they are rehabilitated and sealing of records is an appropriate step. This is another bill that helps people with criminal records re-integrate into society and be able to access housing and employment.

HB 5642 includes the recommendations from the Juvenile Justice Police Oversight Committee (JJPOC). The JJPOC has taken a leadership role in ensuring that the State treats youth offenders in a humane way and ensures that they have the best possible long term outcomes after their brush with the law. The components of this bill includes limitations on how long a youth can be detained without a hearing and better training for law enforcement on how to deal with youth offenders.

In closing, I would like to again say that I am enthused by the conversations that are being had about the criminal justice system and this agenda today shows that as a state we are taking a serious look at how we treat individuals with criminal records and making meaningful decisions about their futures.

Thank you for your time.

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African American Affairs Commission