

Dear Senator Doyle, Senator Kissel, Representative Tong, and members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Stefan Keller and I am submitting this testimony on behalf of the Hartford Deportation Defense Team. We, the Hartford Deportation Defense Team, write to express our support for House Bill 5544: An Act Concerning Connecticut Misdemeanor Sentences. This proposal would reduce the maximum length of all misdemeanor convictions in Connecticut from 365 days to 364 days.

While this seems like a small, technical change, it can make a huge difference in the lives of immigrants in our state. The Hartford Deportation Defense Team is a community group made up of immigrants and non-immigrants alike including mothers, neighbors, youth, and community members from Hartford and surrounding communities. We see day to day how deportations are tearing apart families and communities and many of our members have been personally affected by the criminal justice and deportation systems. Some of our members have spent months in detention centers waiting anxiously for their date in court or have been the family members on the outside, separated from their loved ones and trying desperately to fight for their ability to stay and to hold together a family with a significant piece missing.

When many of us hear deportations we think only undocumented immigrants, but thousands of legal permanent residents are deported every year, most for being charged with minor, non-violent, misdemeanor offenses. Laws passed during the “tough on crime period” of the 1990s included provisions that triggered mandatory deportation for many minor or misdemeanor offenses without any discretion from judges to consider the circumstances of the case. Many of these individuals served mere months or less and can still be ripped apart from their communities and families. This is an awfully harsh and grossly unequal punishment for members of our immigrant communities in comparison to their citizen peers.

It is widely believed across the country, and especially in the State of Connecticut, that many of these “tough on crime” policies did nothing to make our communities safer and just served to target our black and brown community members. We as a state have the power to sever this segment of the prison-to-deportation pipeline and ensure that unjust federal policies do not disproportionately impact our immigrant community members and neighbors.

Misdemeanor sentencing reform would continue to stem the cycle of mass incarceration that more greatly impacts communities of color, allow formerly incarcerated community members to be confident that they will be able to continue to build lives with their families and communities, and give Connecticut judges more discretion to consider the circumstances of each case. Having a misdemeanor offense suddenly end up with someone being permanently separated from their family and community certainly does not sound like a second chance to us.

We urge you to vote favorably on HB 5544 to protect the rights and lives of our community members.

Sincerely,

The Hartford Deportation Defense Team