Testimony in Support of Governor Ned Lamont’s budget proposal to allocate funding for medications for addiction treatment (MAT) for people with opioid use disorder in CT’s jails and prisons.

Dear Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Formica, Representative Lavielle, and the members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Benjamin A. Howell, and I am a primary care physician at the West Haven VA and a health services research fellow at the Yale School of Medicine focusing on the health effects of incarceration. These views are my own as a concerned citizen and physician and do not represent those of the Veteran’s Health Administration or the Yale School of Medicine.

I am here to testify in strong support of providing funding for a program for providing access to medications for addiction treatment (MAT) in our state’s prisons and jails as currently included in the Governor’s recent budget proposal.

In 2017, in Connecticut alone, over 1000 deaths occurred secondary to opioid overdose, a similar number to 2016. More than half the people who died had been detained by the Connecticut Department of Corrections. Connecticut’s experience is not surprising as people with a history of opioid use disorder have a high risk of dying in the months after release after release from prison or jail.

Treatment for opioid use disorder with MAT saves lives. People with opioid use disorder often end up in our correctional system. For this reason, our jails and prisons offer an opportunity to intervene on the opioid epidemic and provide evidence-based treatments for addiction. Data from a program in Rhode Island that screened all incarcerated individuals for opioid use disorder alongside increased treatment access demonstrated a 60% decrease in overdose deaths among the recently incarcerated.

Treatment for opioid use disorder with MAT is cost-effective. This is not surprising given that the cost of one emergency department room visit for a non-fatal opioid overdose can cost nearly as much as a year of methadone treatment (~$4,700). It has been estimated that every dollar spent on addiction treatment can yield at least $4 in reduced drug-related crime.

Also, important to consider is that access to treatment in correctional settings has direct impact on treatment decisions outside of correctional settings. Patients accessing addiction services have legitimate fears of discontinuation of medications started in the community if they are to be incarcerated and the subsequent withdrawal and treatment setback they will experience.

This past summer I had the chance to spend several weeks at the Rhode Island Department of Corrections learning about their prison and jail-based MAT program. I saw how the medical providers and correctional officers were working closely with community addiction treatment providers and
Brown University researchers to ramp up their MAT program. I learned how the worked through security concerns, learned from patients, and strived to improve their program.

While there, I was also able to talk to people incarcerated in their system now able to access treatment. I heard stories of near fatal overdoses and stories of friends who were not as lucky. I heard stories about the fear of the continued chaos and lack of control of opioid addiction and fear about the danger of the illicit fentanyl.

More importantly I heard people who now on treatment felt hopeful about the future. People that knew that access to treatment would help them move towards recovery and leaving the chaos of addiction behind. People hopeful about reconnecting with family and getting jobs.

I will not pretend that it was easy for them to implement their program and I was impressed at how all members of the correctional system and their community partners were working together towards such an important goal. Saving lives and offering a chance at sustained recovery for the vulnerable people incarcerated in their system.

Their important efforts have led to a decrease in overdose deaths in their state and more importantly it offered people with addiction caught in the criminal justice system a path towards recovery. A path away from the chaos of addiction to opioids and towards reconnecting with families and stable employment. A path away from the revolving door of the criminal justice system and towards healing and rehabilitation.

Please provide an opportunity for this vulnerable population in our state, those incarcerated in our prisons and jails, get the access to the addiction treatment we know works and save lives. We have the tools to cut opioid overdose deaths and treat addiction. We just need the courage and fortitude to provide them to the people who need them.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of this bill.