Testimony of Jillian Cundari

in support of

SB 233, AN ACT CONCERNING ELECTIONS

Chairperson Flexer, Chairperson Fox, and members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee, I am here to voice my strong support of Senate Bill 233, An Act Concerning Elections. Particularly, I support its proposition to restore voting rights to convicted felons on parole, without the stipulation of repaying certain fines.

I am a graduate student at UConn pursuing a dual Master’s degree in Public Administration and Social Work, and as such I study the intersection of human service policy and clinical practice. For the past eight months, I have interned at a methadone clinic in the greater Hartford area. In my role, I have borne witness to the eviscerating impacts of incarceration on those seeking and sustaining substance use treatment. As of February 15th, 45.5% of inmates in the United States were incarcerated due to drug offences.¹ Most of these individuals return to their communities, and many of them carry the diagnosis of Substance Use Disorder. They desperately need treatment, and so they enter into the care of substance use treatment providers. Many of the clients at the clinic have just returned to their communities from confinement, and on top of battling a substance use disorder, they are also juggling finding housing, work, and medical care, all on a shoestring budget. When your top priority is fulfilling basic needs, the burden of repaying fines is likely not on your mind, and likely neither is voting.

Prior to the midterm election last year, I had the privilege of registering voters at the clinic. Many, unfortunately, were not eligible to vote, being current parolees or having outstanding debts to the state. In a clinic that serves over 600 clients daily, only 11 people were both interested and eligible. Just 11. When prompting clients to register, the most common response I received was, “I can’t, I have a felony.” They were astounded to learn they were eligible to vote as felons, assuming they weren’t on parole and didn’t have fine debts. I had to turn several people down, because of their confinement status as parolees. These restrictions are prohibitive, and prevent citizens from voting for legislators who will vote for laws that impact them. I think specifically of HB5232- An Act Concerning A Minimum Base Rate for Methadone Maintenance Treatment. To that end, I support the language in SB 233 that affirms the necessity of proactively informing newly eligible felon voters that they can vote, as many are not aware.

I thank the committee for hearing my testimony. I urge them to uphold SB 233, owing to the vitality of ensuring everyone has the opportunity to influence the legislative process.

¹ Federal Bureau of Prisons, Offenses, 15 February 2020