March 22nd, 2021

Re: Black and Brown United in Action Testimony in support of SB. 1059

Dear Chairs Winfield and Stafstrom, Vice Chairs Kasser and Blumenthal, Ranking Members Kissel and Fishbein, and members of the Judiciary Committee,

We are Black and Brown United In Action, a grassroots organization based in Newhallville which focuses on immigrant rights, worker’s rights, women’s rights, and all matters which adversely affect the lives of Black and Brown people in New Haven, Connecticut and are testifying in support of SB. 1059, the Protect Act. Black and Brown United in Action recognizes racism as a public health crisis, and stands in solidarity with Barbara Fair and the Stop Solitary CT in recognizing that solitary confinement is torture, disproportionately affects Black and Brown people, and is still imposed on the future of our state, the young people.

Recent protests calling for radical changes to American policing have brought much-needed attention to the systemic racism within our criminal justice system. This extends beyond policing, of course: Systemic racism is evident at every stage of the system, from policing to prosecutorial decisions, pretrial release processes, sentencing, correctional discipline, and even reentry. The racism inherent in mass incarceration affects children as well as adults, and is often especially punishing for Black and Brown people who are also marginalized along other lines, such as gender and class.

Solitary confinement is the epitome of modern and whipping post of modern slavery. All the fieldwork and research into the COVID-19 global health pandemic negated the impact of the crisis on Black and Brown people. While many hurried to secure essential supplies, prisoners were left to suffer and die from the fast spreading disease. By January 2021, after suffering for months without personal protective gear or proper cleaning procedures and protocol nearly twenty prisoners died from COVID-19.

Over the past year, quarantine during the pandemic has been a glimpse of what solitary confinement is like - countless wonderings of what life is like beyond four walls. Humanity was confined to four walls while watching George Floyd cry out for his mother, as a knee drove into his neck, the torture ending in his death. Consider how many times noises and voices can be heard outside of four walls and impact that has on the psyche. Or how it must be to not be able to see the sun rise, or enjoy a sunset or step out of the boundary of four walls. Or what it must be like not to know what day or time it is, and instead spend time building up anger and frustration with the world and self, while confined in that dark space, almost the size of a closet. In fact, prior to the pandemic, February 2020, Nils Melzer, special rapporteur on torture for the UN, criticized the use of solitary confinement in the United States but specifically mentioned Connecticut’s Department of Correction’s practices, specifically noting it amounts to psychological torture.

Black and Brown United in Action strongly urges you to support SB. 1059: An Act Promoting Responsible Oversight and Treatment, and Effective Correctional Transparency (PROTECT) Act which would: stop extreme isolation by prohibiting isolated confinement except in emergency incidents and situations, end abusive restraints, protect social bonds by guaranteeing incarcerated people a minimum number of free letters, phone calls, and visits, promote correctional officer wellness and ensure oversight and accountability by creating an office of corrections ombuds, which will convene a community advisory council and the power to independently investigate and make recommendations to the Department of Correction.

Sincerely,

Black and Brown United in Action