Dear Chairs Senator Winfield and Representative Stafstrom and members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Fernecia Smith and I am a Justice Advisor at the Connecticut Justice Alliance (CTJA) and I’m writing this testimony to communicate my strong support for S.B. 1059, an act concerning the correction accountability commission, the office of the correction ombuds, the use of isolation confinement, seclusion and restraints, social contact for incarcerated persons and training and workers’ compensation benefits for corrections officer. The CTJA is a statewide youth-adult partnership working to end the criminalization of youth. The Alliance includes Justice Staff, Justice Advisors, and Steering Committee members, which includes lawyers, researchers, clinicians, and social workers, who work across issues areas such as mental/behavioral health, family advocacy, substance abuse, youth services, LGBTQ+ issues, legal representation, education, community and residential services, and public policy reform.

The use of solitary confinement does more harm than good, especially to the mental state. Humans are not designed to function properly in solitude. We are social beings who survive by having constant interaction with other human beings. The conditions within these prisons and prison-like environments are already no good; to then place individuals all alone in a cell with no other interactions for days on end, is like adding fuel to the fire. What you get is someone who will be more
damaged than they were before the confinement, thus making it that much more
difficult for them to reintegrate back into society. That is the purpose of sending
them to prison in the first place, correct? To give them time away from society to
grow as a person and be a better person when they return.

Let’s take the year 2020 for example. Many, if not all, of us experienced our own
little version of solitary confinement with the start of the pandemic. We were stuck
in the home for weeks, months for some, with little to no human interaction
depending on one's living situation. The difference is that not all were in solitary
and we were not completely confined because we had access to virtual means of
communication. Even virtual communication was enough to help people's sanity.
Our pandemic version of confinement was not even CLOSE to what incarcerated
individuals experience in solitary confinement; yet, statistics show that it had a
major impact on the mental health and well being of many people.
I urge you to think about this comparison. The previous year has also reinforced
the need for urgency when addressing issues that have been going on for far too
long. Think about the mental state of the people who have suffered from solitary
confinement, those who are suffering from solitary confinement as we speak, and
those who will suffer from solitary confinement if we do not act on this in an urgent
manner. Is that something you want to be responsible for allowing to continue?

I strongly encourage this committee to vote in favor of S.B. 1059. Thank you for
your time. Fernecia Smith.

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