Testimony in Support of Raised Senate Bill 1059: An Act Concerning the Correctional Accountability Commission, the Office of the Correction Ombuds, the Use of Isolated Confinement, Seclusion and Restraints, Social Contacts for Incarcerated Persons and Training and Workers Compensation Benefits for Correctional Officers
and;
Testimony in Support Senate Bill 972: An Act Concerning the Cost of Telecom Services in Correctional Facilities

Submitted by, Michele Mudrick, Legislative Advocate
Southern New England Conference United Church of Christ
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Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee,

I am Michele Mudrick, Legislative Advocate for the Southern New England Conference United Church of Christ and I am writing today in support of Senate Bill 1059 and Senate Bill 972.

I am writing on behalf of the 614 congregations and more than 120,000 people in our state’s churches. In fact, the United Church of Christ (UCC) is the largest Protestant denomination in Connecticut. Nationally, the UCC has more than 5,700 congregations with nearly 1 million members. In 2014 the assembled delegates and ministers of the historic Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ met and voted on a Resolution that called upon the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ to call for an end to Mass Incarceration for Non-Violent Offenses, to advocate for passage of legislation that promotes alternatives to mass incarceration, and to support racial and economic justice in criminal sentencing and restorative justice principles in all possible circumstances.

I am in support of ending the torture of solitary confinement in Connecticut and in favor of humane and effective means to keep prisons and the people who live and work there safe. Unfortunately, decades of misguided policies and a profound lack of oversight have led prisons to rely on highly punitive and ineffective measures like solitary confinement. Many correctional systems are recognizing that using isolation and other forms of violence is cruel, short-sighted and counterproductive. Instead, more systems are turning to alternatives, including pro-social programing, mental health treatment, violence prevention and restorative justice to understand why disputes happen in the first place. By prioritizing treatment instead of isolation for individuals who commit disciplinary infractions, prison and jail systems have reported decreased violence.

Connecticut does not operate effective alternatives to isolation for people with mental illness. Garner Correctional Institution was supposed to serve as an alternative unit for individuals with mental illness, but DOC has continued to place individuals with mental illness in isolation across the system. The conditions at Garner are extremely harsh; for example, in the segregation unit at Garner, individuals are locked down 22 or more hours a day.¹

¹ Report to the Criminal Justice Policy and Planning Division Pursuant to Public Act No. 17-239, Conn. Dept Correction (2020) (Addendum J)
A number of jurisdiction across the United States have successfully found alternative means of preventing violence and resolving disputes by providing mental health supports, incentives to reward positive behavior, intensive programming, and staff who are trained in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, restorative justice and working with special populations. I encourage Connecticut to institute these proven alternatives instead of solitary confinement.

Colorado abolished solitary confinement a couple years ago and as a result has seen an 85% reduction in violence in its prisons. In 2019 New Jersey passed legislation to end it and New York recently passed the HALT (Humane Alternatives to Long Term Confinement) bill. I encourage Connecticut to do the same.

I am also in support of providing cost-free telecommunications for incarcerated persons. SB 972 would eliminate the cost of prison communication and help connect Connecticut families with incarcerated loved ones. Connecticut ranks last in the country in the affordability of prison phone calls. Connecticut families pay as much as $5.00 for just a 15 minute phone call. COVID-19 has worsened the cost burden of calls as visits are restricted and families struggle financially.

Every year, Connecticut families spend over $12 million to talk to incarcerated loved ones with the State of Connecticut taking $7 million in kickbacks and Connecticut’s private telecom provider Securus pocketing $5.2 million. One in three people went into debt trying to stay connected to their incarcerated loved ones, and women, largely Black and Brown women carried 87 percent of the burden.

The research shows that incarcerated people do better both within the correctional facility and when they reenter the community when they stay connected to their support networks. Also, children facing parental incarceration do better at home and in school when they are able to maintain relationships with their parents in prison. Communication is critical to reduce the trauma suffered by the 1 in 28 children whose parents are incarcerated. Incarcerated loved ones cannot hear or share simple comforting words without threatening the family’s financial stability. When people are supported, they become committed to their own success and engage in rehabilitative practices. No program is more effective at improving reentry success than communication that strengthens relationships between incarcerated people and their loved ones. No family should have to forgo checking on the safety of their loved one because they cannot afford to. The positive social and fiscal benefits associated with communication significantly outweigh its costs.

All of God’s children deserve a humane environment, even when incarcerated and all of God’s children deserve to have phone contact with their incarcerated support network. I encourage you to support both of these bills.

Thank you for your work and the opportunity to supply written testimony in support of these bills.

Blessings,

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