Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 1059
by the Rev. Allie Perry

Dear Chairs Winfield and Stafstrom, Vice Chairs Kasser and Blumenthal, Ranking Members Kissel and Fishbein, and members of the Judiciary Committee, I am the Rev. Allie Perry from New Haven and a member of the steering committee of Stop Solitary CT. I am testifying in strong support of Senate Bill 1059 and urge you to vote favorably for it.

There are so many compelling reasons to do so, but for me as a person of faith, the most imperative are moral and religious. By whatever name -- solitary confinement, administration segregation, restrictive housing -- prolonged isolation is a human rights abuse. It degrades, dehumanizes, and brutalizes those who are subjected to it, defiling their inherent, and God-given, dignity.

If you believe, as I do, that all persons are created in the image of God, then caging people for 22 plus hours a day in a cell the size of a parking space should shock our consciences. It is barbaric and cruel, a form of state-sanctioned and taxpayer-subsidized torture.

The Bible exhorts us to “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” [Heb.13:3]. This means those of us on the outside are to identify with those on the inside, as if they were our flesh and blood. And they are—our siblings, our parents, our children, our kin, almost all of whom will be returning to our communities. We cannot have people returning more damaged then when they entered the system. We must respect and protect their dignity as human beings. We cannot be torturing them.

There are alternatives to isolation. Stop Solitary CT has issued a report “Alternatives to Isolation: Effective Tools to Increase Safety in Connecticut Prisons & Jails,” which describes these alternatives. You will all get copies. These are humane alternatives that promote pro-social programming and increase safety and security not just for those incarcerated, but for staff as well. Since implementing such alternatives, Colorado for one example reports a 80% reduction in violence. Correctional staff there, initially skeptical, are now converts. The True Unit at Cheshire is another example right here in CT.
If we know that humane alternatives work, why is CT not using them across the system? To fail to do so, I submit, amounts to correctional malpractice. And opens the DOC up to lawsuits for abusing the constitutional rights of individuals in its care.

The movement to end prolonged isolation is growing across the country. New Jersey has already passed legislation to reduce the practice and just last Thursday New York passed the HALT (Humane Alternatives to Long-term Confinement) legislation making them now a leader. It is time for CT to become a leader too.

The writer Dostoevsky said, “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” Passage of SB 1059 offers CT the opportunity to become more civilized and humane. I urge your support. Thank you for your work.

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