Testimony Supporting
S.B. 972: An Act Concerning The Cost of Telecommunication Services In Correctional Facilities
S.B. 1058: An Act Concerning Compassionate Parole Release by the Board of Pardons and Paroles and Concerning Staff of the Department of Correction

Committee on Judiciary
March 22, 2021

Dear Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, Senator Kasser, Representative Blumenthal, Senator Kissel, Representative Fishbein, and esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Sana Shah, and I am testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based child advocacy organization working to ensure that one day Connecticut is a thriving and equitable state where all children achieve their full potential.

Connecticut Voices for Children is testifying in support of S.B. 972: An Act Concerning The Cost of Telecommunication Services In Correctional Facilities.

Every year, Connecticut families spend over $12 million to talk to incarcerated loved ones, and even prior to the pandemic, nearly one in three went into debt trying to stay connected. This presents a major economic barrier to families, and Black and Brown women carry 87 percent of this burden.

At Connecticut Voices for Children, our strategic aim is toward economic justice. Today, the state’s income and wealth divides are greater than ever, but so much of a child’s well-being is rooted in family economic security. We believe that our state’s social and economic well-being depends upon the dismantling of policies that perpetuate poverty and criminalize poverty, as well as the creation of policies that advance inclusive growth and policies that ensure pathways to opportunity for all our children, youth, and families. There is an interdependent relationship between economic justice and criminal justice, and without addressing economic barriers, further justice reforms will be limited in their effectiveness.

Incarceration already places emotional and economic pressure on families, and more than half the state’s prison population are parents. The physical separation between children and their parents during incarceration can disrupt attachments and harm children’s health and well-being. Additionally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, prisons have decreased visitation, making it even more difficult for children to have the secure parent bond necessary for them to flourish. As a result, families are now especially...

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relying on phone calls to keep them connected with incarcerated loved ones, but Connecticut has the most expensive prison phone call rate in the country; it can cost as much as $5 every time a child wants to hear their parent’s voice for just 15 minutes. Research shows that children facing parental incarceration also do better at home and school when they can maintain relationships with their parents in prison. Economic stability from not going into debt due to the high cost of phone calls will increase child prosperity and future economic outcomes. Finally, family contact through phone calls also helps incarcerated individuals transition back to their communities.

**Connecticut Voices for Children also supports S.B. 1058: An Act Concerning Compassionate Parole Release by the Board of Pardons and Paroles and Concerning Staff of the Department of Correction** and **S.B. 1059: An Act Concerning The Correction 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 Correction Officers.** These bills will improve the conditions of DOC facilities and help to ensure that people who are incarcerated are treated with dignity.

S.B. 1058 advances incarcerated people's safety and humanity by protecting their health and making it easier to release individuals into community supervision if their pre-existing conditions make them vulnerable to illness inside DOC facilities. Incarcerated people are dependent upon the state for their health, and current prison conditions make them especially susceptible to illness. For example, in Connecticut, 1 out of 3 incarcerated individuals have tested positive for COVID-19, which is 4.2 times the rate in the state overall. This bill will help mitigate the risk of serious illness or death.

S.B. 1059 supports the physical and psychological safety of individuals and the communities to which they return to. Solitary confinement has increased significantly in recent years; this practice relegates individuals to an isolated cell for an average of 23 hours a day, either by themselves or a cellmate, with minimal interaction, sunlight, space, activity, or control. Solitary confinement has harmful outcomes for both the individual (including increased mortality post-release) and the community's public safety, and it is an expensive line item in correctional budgets. Connecticut should limit the practice of solitary confinement, defined as a torture technique under international law, through enacting this policy.

**Connecticut Voices for Children urges the Committee on Judiciary to pass S.B. 972, S.B. 1058, and S.B. 1059.** These policy changes support parents' ability to connect with their children and loved ones, decrease recidivism, advance positive public health outcomes, and protect the safety of incarcerated individuals.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sana Shah
Chief of Staff
Connecticut Voices for Children

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