Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee,

I write in support of the proposed PROTECT Act, S.B. 1059. I am a Professor of Law at Quinnipiac University School of Law where I have been teaching criminal law and sentencing since 1996. In addition, I have volunteered as a teacher at York Correctional Institution since 2011. I have published two books on sentencing including The Justice of Mercy (2010) and Sentencing in Time (2017). I have also helped to research best practices at the behest of both the Connecticut Sentencing Commission and the Connecticut Department of Correction. See Evidence-Based Reentry Initiatives Devoted to Strengthening Positive Social Relationships: A Report of the Recidivism Reduction Committee of the Connecticut Sentencing Commission and Recommendations of the Women’s Working Group on Strengthening Family and Community Ties (March 13, 2018)(submitted to then-Director Karl Lewis).

The empirical research is clear that coercive penal practices like solitary confinement and shackling are deeply harmful, both for the correction officers who are required to impose them and for the incarcerated people who are subject to them.¹ The memory of such dehumanizing experiences persists, festers, and fosters shame, guilt, fear, trauma, resentment, and sometimes, more aggression. I have had many incarcerated people relate to me in detail these events and feelings, years and years and years after the fact. These experiences haunt, harass, and continue to dehumanize people for the rest of their lives. The Protect Act rightly limits those practices to emergency situations only.

Alternatives to these coercive practices are legion. We know that most people in prison around the country have experienced childhood trauma: food insecurity, housing insecurity, multiple foster care settings, violence visited on friends and family members, direct abuse, and neglect.² Most incarcerated men have been shot or knifed or have seen a close friend or family member shot or knifed. Most people in prison were victims before they were offenders. These traumas have gone unaddressed, leading to shame, substance abuse, and violence. More coercion and violence in prison can only make for more coercion and violence on the outside. To break the cycle, we need a different approach. For example, my colleague, Amber Kelly, teaches trauma coping skills to men and women at York and at Cheshire Correctional Institution. Participants always want her programs to be expanded. VERA programs have had success in the T.R.U.E. and W.O.R.T.H. units at York and Cheshire with restorative justice methods. Sometimes, the answer is as simple as encouraging people to express their feelings in words, not deeds, Sometimes, the answer is as simple as treating people with respect, lending an ear, withholding judgment, and understanding the circumstances that may have led to an outbreak of rule-breaking.

It is often hard for those of us on the outside to understand the frustrations of being incarcerated. I know incarcerated mothers who cannot speak to or receive visits from their children because caretakers won’t or can’t facilitate them, who cannot get information from doctors when their children are in the hospital, who have no ability to protect their child from an emotionally abusive home, who have their babies taken from them at birth and placed directly in foster care. I know many incarcerated people who watch

---

¹ For a small sample of this literature, see Keramet Reiter, 23/7: Pelican Bay Prison and the Rise of Long-Term Solitary Confinement (Yale Univ. Press, 2016).
² See, e.g., Wolff & Shi, Childhood and Adult Trauma Experiences of Incarcerated Persons and Their Relationship to Adult Behavioral Health Problems and Treatment, 9 International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health 1908-1926(2012); Short documentary: “Step Inside the Circle,” Compassion Prison Project https://compassionprisonproject.org/the-documentaries/
helplessly as a beloved spouse seeks a divorce and moves on, who watch helplessly as family members fall into poverty, addiction, or suffer from violence. Petitions for resentencing or habeas corpus relief raise hopes, then dash them, again and again. And all of this frustrated helplessness is on top of the endless rules that govern where and when you walk, where and when you talk, where and when you shower, where and when you eat. If people in prison lose their cool sometimes, understanding and communication often go much further than more coercion. The Protect Act thoughtfully provides an ombudsperson who can give voice to the hidden anguish of those in prison and their families.

The research is also clear that helping people in prison maintain ties with their families and communities is key to successful reintegration after release. Our system relies almost exclusively on family members for support after incarceration. I repeat: Our system relies almost exclusively on family members for support after incarceration. Supporting family visits, family phone calls, and treating family members with gratitude and respect when they make the difficult effort to visit someone in prison is thus cost-effective policy as well as right and humane.

Family members suffer from imprisonment, too. Taking away the chance to communicate with loved ones in prison punishes children, wives, husbands, fathers, mothers, grandfathers, and grandmothers. The Protect Act rightly makes it impermissible to deny visitation privileges as punishment and ensures that families do not bear even more of the burden of incarceration through expensive phone calls.

The late George M. Camp, former Director of the Missouri Department of Corrections and former Deputy Commissioner of the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, said something at a conference I attended that I will never forget: He said the right approach to imprisonment is to treat those we imprison as we would want our children to be treated, if they had been imprisoned. I urge the Judiciary Committee to consider this bill with that in mind. What rules would you want in place to protect your child and to enable them to communicate with you?

Sincerely,

Linda Ross Meyer
Professor of Law
Quinnipiac University School of Law (for identification purposes only; I am not acting as a representative, but expressing my own views)