Good morning distinguished members of Judiciary Committee:

My name is Barbara Fair and I am a mother, grandmother, licensed clinical social worker and a staunch supporter of human rights and racial justice. I am here to speak in strong support of SB459, an act concerning correctional oversight and transformative change within CT Dept of Corrections.

I read about Connecticut’s opioid settlement with mixed emotions. I applaud the moms who fought tenaciously for accountability for the loss of their loved ones caught up in the opioid crisis. At the same time, it was a painful reminder how the tears of white mothers receive national response while the rest of us cry alone. One mom tearfully spoke about the loss of two children to the opioid crisis. She fought to hold the wealthy Sackler family accountable for her pain stating “They destroyed our lives”. As an African American mom, I have cried an ocean of tears since my youngest son was tortured soon after turning 17 inside Ct’s supermax prison. He entered Manson Youth a promising hip hop performer and songwriter. He entered the system as a pre-trial detainee with misdemeanor charges. Because he resisted the inhumane treatment that was a norm he was transferred to Northern supermax, a place built to break people. He left Northern with a shattered mind, a broken spirit and the inability to function in a productive manner. He spent time at Garner CI for the seriously mentally ill where he was heavily medicated. He was misdiagnosed with schizophrenia and heavily medicated for that disorder yet I knew his mental decline was the direct result of human torture at a time when his brain was still developing. As a clinician I knew that kind of trauma at an early age might be irreparable. While he was inside I suffered from panic attacks feeling my son’s agony pulling on my spirit. Each day I had to get up and make it through the work day while worrying about my son’s well being until I was able to get him released. I have cried an ocean of tears and endured countless restless nights since my son was released from custody. There is no Attorney General to assist me in holding Ct Dept of Correction liable for harm they caused my son and many other sons and daughter, fathers and mothers. Their role is to protect the state so we, primarily African American and Latino mothers cry alone.

I witnessed firsthand the irreparable harm isolation causes and so I cannot rest until state sanctioned abuse of incarcerated people is no longer an acceptable norm. No one should be allowed to degrade, humiliate and abuse another with impunity. I can’t rest until PROTECT Act 2022 is codified into law. An executive order no matter how meaningful won’t do because it does not incorporate independent oversight and can end at any time.

Connecticut Dept of Corrections is one of few states with no independent oversight. It is the only state who treats and oversees its own health care. As a result, countless incarcerated people end up living with chronic disease which diminishes their quality of life and reduces their life span. Many have suffered and died as a direct result of medical neglect or incompetence. Every deceased individual left a family behind to grieve their loss of life never expecting a prison sentence to become a death sentence. Stop Solitary Ct has worked tirelessly with legislators since 2016 to significantly reduce the use of isolation in Ct prisons, jails and youth facilities. Solitary confinement, by any name, is defined by International law as the act of holding individuals for 22 hours a day in a cell with no programming and meaningful social contact. UN policy dictates solitary confinement only be used in exceptional cases, as last resort, never as punishment and never beyond 15 days at a time due to the psychological harm it causes. Ct has held people in these conditions for months and years. Psychiatrists say the brain begins to work differently within a few days of isolation.

The department requires more staff. One doctor stated in a recent public forum that CT Dept of Corrections does not have the number of “hands on” staff to provide the community standard of care the Constitution demands. To recruit and retain staff DOC must (1) make budgetary adjustments to provide competitive wages and benefits to align with the private sector for medical and mental health professionals and (2) transform the culture from one too toxic to work effectively and compassionately.
Professionals should be able to provide compassionate and ethical care to individuals with chronic mental and medical health issues, many created and/or exacerbated by incarceration. Many find departmental policies conflict with their code of ethics "first do no harm". They found working in a compassionate, humane manner is discouraged.

Connecticut has a surplus budget of $1.5 billion and rainy-day fund of $3.1 billion so money is clearly not the problem. It's about the lack of will to treat people with human dignity. Those days of keeping people in cages for 20-22 hours a day would no longer be a norm. Programming and social interaction would become the norm which means officers interacting with incarcerated people as opposed to sitting around relaxed all day, evening or night. It would mean structured recreation and groups addressing physical and mental health, meditation, and developing/improving coping and decision making skills to prevent correctional violence and mental decline.

Solitary confinement robs one of sanity and humanity. I think of countless minds being shattered, spirits being broken, humanity diminished while we wait for justice for incarcerated people. Within the carceral system few are held accountable for “destroying lives” and devastating families.

Last year legislatures did their job. They passed the PROTECT Act with bi partisan support. A monumental task. The governor chose to veto legislation which would have put us in line with other states who already have legislation codified into law. Connecticut remains convinced they are a national model for change. Time to face reality. We are not. There are other states who have implemented policy to address isolation of incarcerated people. The Dept of Justice has cited Manson Youth for abuses within that facility and United Nations cited Ct prisons for abuse/torture in 2020. It's time we take our heads out of the sand and begin the work we have convinced ourselves we have done. Connecticut cages and harms people every day. Those people come from marginalized communities like New Haven, Bridgeport, Hartford and Waterbury. Over 71% are African American and Latino although they only make up about 23% of Ct's general population. 85-90% of those held in isolating conditions are African American and Latino. These facts should be quite disturbing to a just, non racist society.

I applaud the success of moms holding the Sacklers accountable for harm and death they caused in the name of building generational wealth. I saw the tears and felt the pain of those mothers. I look forward to the day when the tears of all moms can be seen and felt because we cry too. Please do not intentionally delay justice. Allow your moral integrity to move SB459 with expediency out of the various committees, to passage from both House and Senate and onto the desk of the governor for his signature. It's time we do what's right for all of Ct. Thank you for your time and the opportunity to be heard.

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