Testimony in Support of The Protect Act / SB 459

Dear Chairs Winfield and Stafstrom, Vice Chairs Flexer and Blumenthal, Ranking Members Kissel and Fishbein, and esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee:

We write on behalf of Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut (CONECT), a broad-based, interfaith, multi-racial organization of congregations in New Haven and Fairfield Counties representing over 30,000 people. We would like to express our strong support for Senate Bill 459.

The vast majority of people who are currently incarcerated in Connecticut will re-enter into society. Rather than rehabilitate individuals, as is the purpose of prisons and jails, solitary confinement traumatizes individuals. Extreme isolation, also known as solitary confinement, qualifies as torture and causes profound psychological harm. SB 459 would mitigate extreme isolation in Connecticut’s prisons and jails, positively impacting individuals both while incarcerated and when they return to their communities.

With this legislation, any confinement that was utilized would be limited: Incarcerated people would be guaranteed at least five hours out of cell per day, unless isolated confinement was strictly necessary to protect staff and incarcerated people and never for more than fifteen consecutive days. These measures are both reasonable and humane. Further, the data from other correctional systems across the country demonstrates that prosocial activity, treatment, and other alternative approaches to rehabilitation are both more humane and more effective than isolation, in-cell restraints, and other forms of punishment at ensuring safety among incarcerated people and correctional staff.

SB 459 considers the mental and emotional wellbeing not only of the people who are incarcerated, but also of correctional officers. This legislation would require the DOC to implement training and other strategies to mitigate trauma and its effects among staff, such as burnout, substance abuse, aggression, and suicide. This attention to the mental and emotional health of DOC staff is critical.

Finally, prisons and jails, by nature, operate behind closed doors. As a result, outside oversight is severely limited. The creation of an Ombudsman and Advisory Commission for Correctional Oversight, included within this legislation, is absolutely necessary. Unscheduled and unrestricted site visits, access to inspect DOC records, and the establishment of a confidential system to receive feedback from incarcerated people, family members,
and DOC personnel, will enable real, meaningful oversight and accountability to ensure the health and safety of both incarcerated people and correctional officers.

As people of faith, no matter our specific faith tradition, we recognize and respect the sacredness of all life. Solitary confinement violates the dignity and sanctity of human life. We strongly urge this committee to vote in favor of SB 459.

Sincerely,

Dawn Grant, Stratford, CT

Philip Kent, Hamden, CT

Rodney Moore, Shelton, CT

Tri-chairs, Criminal Justice Reform Team, CONECT