RE: SB 459: ‘An Act Concerning the Commission for Correctional Oversight, the Use of Isolated Confinement, Seclusion, Restraints, Strip Searches, Social Contacts for Incarcerated Persons, Transparency for Conditions of Incarceration and Correctional Officer Training’

Date: March 23, 2022

Dear respected members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Amber Kelly and I write today to voice my strong support regarding ‘An Act Concerning the Commission for Correctional Oversight, the Use of Isolated Confinement, Seclusion, Restraints, Strip Searches, Social Contacts for Incarcerated Persons, Transparency for Conditions of Incarceration and Correctional Officer Training’.

I am a Social Worker, an Associate Professor of Social Work, member of the Social Welfare Action Alliance and Sex Workers and Allies Network, and Co-Chair of the Women’s Resettlement Working Group in New Haven, CT. Each of these positionalities has led me to see firsthand the ongoing negative impacts of the trauma of the uses of solitary confinement, seclusion, overuse of restraints and strip searches, and the limiting of social contacts for current and formerly incarcerated residents of Connecticut.

One young man, incarcerated in Connecticut prisons for more than 20 years, discuss the inability to sleep, hypervigilance, and nightmares when he did sleep, stemming from his time in solidarity confinement. Another young woman talked of bailing up in the fetal position, beginning to hear voices due to the deprivation of human contact while in solitary. Yet a third spoke of his deep depression and suicidality when confined to seclusion and unable to access his greatest resource for getting through incarceration and back to his community, his family.

This Act would ensure oversight and accountability through the creation of an Ombudsman and Advisory Commission for Correctional Oversight to evaluate how our prisons and jails are operating, made up a commission of stakeholders from across the state of CT. This Commission would assure some level of accountability for how our prison systems operate to CT residents, whether incarcerated or not.

The Act would also ensure that no one is forced to endure the unnecessary violence and harm that is extreme isolation in CT prisons. Our current standards are not in compliance with international policy for confinement, and this Act would bring us up to speed with the rest of the world and end the current human rights abuses that our occurring under our isolation policies.

The Act would also end the misuse of lockdowns, allowing access to exercise, meals, programming, and healthcare for incarcerated residents. It would also mandate policies towards Corrections Officer wellness, in effort to mitigate stresses from the position that may lead to abuses with our prisons and jails. Lastly, this Act promotes transparency of the workings of CT prisons and jails to CT residents,
allowing for full decision-making in the democratic process when it comes to the policies for our prisons and jails.

This Act, known in the community as the Protect Act, would decrease the opportunity for psychological harm and other forms of violence that happen under current prison and jail policies in our state. Most of our incarcerated residents are coming home one day, and are not able to transition back to contributive, healthy, and productive members of our community if they come out of our prisons more damaged than when they went in. We have a real opportunity here to create policies for safer and more humane prisons and jails local to us, ultimately leading to safer and healthier communities across our state.

Thank you for your time in reading this letter of support, and I encourage you strongly to consider how this Act supports us all in supporting healthier communities across the state of Connecticut.

Sincerely,

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