TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF RAISED S.B. 459 and H.B. 5390
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Good afternoon Chairs and Honorable members of the Judiciary Committee, my name is Aileen Keays and I direct the Connecticut Children with Incarcerated Parents, or “CTCIP”, Initiative within the University of Connecticut’s Institute for Municipal & Regional Policy. The CTCIP Initiative’s mission is to improve the quality of support for children with incarcerated parents (CIP) by using the various data and knowledge it gains to inform public policy and practice.

I am here to testify in support of Senate Bill 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, and House Bill 5390, AN ACT REPEALING STATUTORY PROVISIONS THAT IMPOSE LIABILITY ON AN INDIVIDUAL FOR REPAYMENT OF COSTS INCURRED WHEN THE INDIVIDUAL WAS INCARCERATED.

Regarding S.B. 459, CTCIP will dedicate the focus of the testimony on the provision to require weekly contact visits for loved ones. Contact visits are extraordinarily important for the incarcerated individuals, their child/children, and other loved ones. Studies have shown that maintaining meaningful contact with loved ones during incarceration lowers the rate of recidivism for that individual, which suggests that supporting policies that promote the maintenance and creation of social engagement with community members during incarceration would increase public safety. For children, physical contact with a caregiver that the child is securely attached to has a physiological effect on the child’s body which promotes physical health, and emotional and mental wellbeing. Physical contact also promotes a smoother transition for all when the loved one returns home. Further, physical
Contact is seen by correctional departments in other states and nations as an important aspect of promoting a more positive and safer correctional environment. Just over the border in New York, maximum security correctional facilities provide several hours of full contact visits each day. When correctional staff were asked about the commitment to lengthy and frequent contact visits, the benefits in terms of institutional behavior were quickly cited.

I would like to address one specific provision – on lines 925-928 – regarding an individual for whom contact social visits are denied. I would like the social visit opportunity to explicitly state that the non-contact social visit offered must be in-person and, when available, virtual. Our initiative, and the families we support, are concerned with in-person visits being replaced by virtual. Both options should be available to incarcerated individuals’ loved ones.

Although protecting an individual’s inherent need for social contact while incarcerated may seem to be a dramatic and for some potentially frightening change, these policies have long been tested and successfully used in other states and nations. Fear surrounding alleged risks associated with contact visits should be mitigated in the context of these policies being long-standing elsewhere, including with individuals serving time in maximum security facilities.

Regarding H.B. 5390, the state already allocates the cost of one’s incarceration to relevant state agencies. In 2014, the Prison Policy Initiative found that incarcerated people had a median annual income of $19,185 prior to their incarceration, which is 41% less than non-incarcerated people of similar ages. Families with a loved one incarcerated are already amongst the poorest in our state. The economic impact of the incarceration itself further nosedives the family into poverty. Below are some significant points to consider on the financial impact, as outlined in our children with incarcerated parents fact sheet.

- Parental incarceration creates a significant financial hardship that often contributes to the family’s reliance on state-funded social services, programs, and financial assistance.

- On average, a family’s income declines by 22% when a father becomes incarcerated. Even in the year after the father returns home, the family income remains 15% lower than the year before incarceration.

- Both education and parental income are strong indicators of children’s future economic mobility.

- Nationally, formerly incarcerated people are unemployed at a rate of over 27% — higher than the total U.S. unemployment rate during any historical period, including the Great Depression.
• Parents left to care for CIP report difficulties in meeting basic household needs such as food, housing, utilities, transportation, and clothing.

• According to a 2015 survey, 2 in 3 families had difficulty meeting basic needs due to a family member’s incarceration and 70% of these families were caring for at least one child under 18 years old.

Poverty and incarceration can be a vicious and multi-generational cycle. Receiving inheritance or some other significant amount of money can be the key to finally ending the cycle for generations to come. It serves no one to force families to remain destitute and vulnerable to criminal justice system involvement, and government assistance reliant, by confiscating money received. This practice is counterproductive and needs to end now.

Thank you for your time, I would be happy to respond to any questions.