Written Testimony of Dr. Vamsi Koneru
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WRITTEN TESTIMONY Supporting 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

Chairs Winfield and Stafstrom, Vice Chairs Flexer and Blumenthal, Ranking Members Kissel and Fishbein, and Distinguished Members of the Judiciary Committee,

My name is Dr. Vamsi Koneru, I am a resident of West Hartford, CT and a faculty member at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine and a clinical psychologist with a specialization in working with survivors of trauma. As a member of Stop Solitary CT, I am writing to express my views on solitary confinement and my strong support for Senate Bill 459, also known as The Protect Act. The Protect Act codifies into law Governor Lamont’s executive order to ensure that no one is in solitary confinement beyond 15 days, increases the minimal time out of one’s cell to 5 hours per day and provides a powerful structure for oversight.

It has been said that “Justice is what Love looks Like in Public.” I know that each of you is here today because of a love for your community and a deep commitment to service, compassion and justice. I ask you today to let compassion guide your action. Join me in standing up for the rights of all human beings by voting to support the Protect Act.

In my practice, I work with survivors of trauma, many of whom are also involved in our criminal justice system. Trauma and incarceration have tremendous overlap, as approximately 90% of individuals who are incarcerated also have a history of significant adversity and trauma. While there are many treatments that can benefit trauma survivors, a common thread is the presence of safe, stable, nurturing relationships, as well as the opportunity to experience patterned, rhythmic activity. Both of these help regulate the nervous system.
Solitary confinement could not be further from this treatment standard and disregards the basic concepts of human rights and dignity. It re-traumatizes the 90% of people who entered into incarceration with histories of trauma. The practice is torturous, oppressive and inhumane. And, in addition to these serious ethical concerns, the deprivation and dehumanization embedded in this practice undoubtedly worsens the health of an already highly vulnerable population.

How might this practice contribute to worsening someone’s health? In other words, what happens in the brain and body of someone in solitary confinement?

The stress and isolation of solitary confinement is constant and unrelenting, which causes individuals in such confinement to have a chronic, over-active stress response, also known as the Toxic Stress Response. The Toxic Stress Response can lead to lasting changes in brain structure and function including significant over-activity in the amygdala, or the brain’s fear and reactivity center, and an inhibition of the prefrontal cortex, or the seat of language, thought and judgement. Additionally, this response is associated with many severe health consequences including doubling the risk for heart disease, respiratory illness, behavioral health issues and can reduce a person’s life expectancy by up to 20 years.

A century prior to the publication of the above-mentioned science, the Supreme Court wrote about individuals in solitary confinement and noted “it becomes impossible to arouse them, and others become violently insane; others, still, commit suicide; while those who stand the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service to the community.”

More than 90% of incarcerated people will return to the community – do we want them to be broken, unable to connect with others and to struggle to be of service or able to live a life that is marked by contribution and meaning? How can we support individuals so that they are not re-traumatized by their incarceration? How can we become more curious about humane solutions as opposed to modeling cruelty and vengeance? Supporting Senate Bill 459 is an important step in this direction.
Thank you very much for your kind attention and the opportunity to speak in support of Senate Bill 459.