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

My name is Denise Paley. I am a resident of Guilford, where I serve as a Board Member of NAMI Shoreline and on the CT State Advisory Board for DMHAS. I am here today as a mother to express my support for SB 458 AN ACT CONCERNING THE PROVISION OF SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER SERVICES AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES TO INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE INCARCERATED and 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.

I am here because my child was arrested during his first psychotic episode. And now he navigates his unfolding serious mental illness through DOC. Through our experience I continue to learn truths about how dehumanizing and unproductive our criminal justice system can be and am compelled to speak out with the hope of making it better.

According to the recent CT Memo on Mental Health dated June 2020, 40% of our state prison population has a history of mental illness and about 30% is living with a serious mental illness. If our prison system is to be effective, it needs to address what caused people with mental illness to break the law. To be constructive, it needs to provide meaningful treatment aimed at more than symptom relief. It needs to be aimed at recovery.

People incarcerated with mental illness are those most often subjected to isolation which is in direct opposition to their needs. There are some misconceptions about how isolation is used. It’s not always for safety or reserved as a last resort. Any time minimal human contact is taken away for extended periods of time, it’s isolation. This can cause mental health issues for any human being.

So, what have I learned? I’ve learned people like my child are kept in a cell about the size of a bathroom. It can be difficult to come across basic necessities like a spork or a pillow. There is no outdoor time for fresh air in the winter. Currently, Ellis is in his cell for a minimum of 21 hours a day. This bill would require up to 5 hours a day out of cell which could benefit his mental health. Ellis has previously been taken to the “infirmary” for his mental illness which means subjecting to a strip search and isolation for 23 hours a day without any of his personals. It is how my son is managed during a crisis. In segregation, suffering alone with his illness. Solitary confinement is associated with increased risk of self-mutilation and suicidal ideation, greater anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, paranoia and yes, aggression. It also increases risk of cardiovascular problems. The APA (American Psychological Association) reports that for juvenile offenders solitary confinement can cause irreversible damage by rewiring a still growing brain.

When Colorado banned the use of solitary confinement in 2018 Rick Raemisch, Executive Director, Colorado DOC said, “We made this policy change because we are committed to public safety. The research has shown that housing someone in a cell the size of a parking space for 22 or more hours per day for extended periods of time damages them both mentally and physically. Since most people who go to prison — 97 percent — return to their community, that means we were releasing people back into their communities in worse shape than when they arrived.”
SB 459 will ensure oversight of the DOC. An objective third party is essential to a system that meets basic standards and strives for continuous improvement. It supports training of DOC employees who interact with incarcerated people to learn to recognize symptoms and practice de-escalation techniques.

Personally, I have lived in a state of unrelenting despair since my child’s incarceration. The idea of him being in prison had been previously unthinkable. At the root of it, it’s not the time away that’s most painful. It’s the damage that will be done by what our state deems “rehabilitation”. What’s most painful is that I know that every day my child spends in prison he moves that much further from any possibility of recovering from his illness. If our CJS is not going to consider the underlying cause of why a person broke the law to begin with than the whole practice of incarceration is futile. I’m begging you. Move these bills forward. Help fix this.

Respectfully,

Denise Paley

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Ellis Tibere shortly prior to his arrest.