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

My name is the Rev. Allie Perry and I reside in New Haven, CT. I am writing to urge your support for Senate Bill 459, this year’s version of The PROTECT Act, legislation designed to mitigate the use of solitary confinement and to implement oversight and more humane, enlightened practices in the service of increasing the security and well-being of those who work in CT’s correctional system and those in its care.

I don’t need to rehearse the litany of harms and trauma that prolonged isolation causes, emotionally, physically, psychologically, and spiritually. After last year’s version of the bill which the Judiciary voted favorably out of committee – I thank the Judiciary for their support then – after that, I feel confident, you all are fully aware of the harms.

I acknowledge, however, that for much of my life I was not. Like probably many in society, I had no idea what abuse was happening, hidden from public view and scrutiny, within prison cells behind prison walls. I had no idea how pervasive isolation practices had become in CT prisons and throughout the United States.

My ‘wake up call’ came in 2008 through my work with the National Religious Campaign Against Torture and its priority on ending torture within US prisons. I was horrified to learn that, as a tool of the trade, correctional officers were routinely caging people, as if they were animals, in a cell the size of a parking space for 22+ hours a day, deprived of sensory stimulation, fresh air and natural light. Such treatment is cruel, but has become far too usual a punishment.

In 2017 when I helped to bring a replica solitary confinement cell to the New Haven Public Library (later it went to the State Capitol), I learned just how usual this torturous punishment is. The number of people I met at the New Haven library who had been subjected to solitary stunned me. They cringed at the sight of the replica and explained they had no need to enter it. They had had first-hand experience and, even years after returning home, still carried the trauma and damaging effects.
This is, for me, a profoundly moral issue, first and foremost a matter of faith. If you believe, as I do, that all persons are created in the image of God, then we, as a society, cannot and must not be in the business of willfully subjecting anyone, including those in DOC’s care, to prolonged isolation. Why? Because it is inherently dehumanizing, degrading, and damaging. It is, as a recent Washington Post editorial described, “a sanitized form of torture.” In no way does prolonged isolation contribute to correction and rehabilitation. Nor does it increase safety. To the contrary, it can precipitate violence. Statistics document yet another disturbing dimension of this abusive treatment: it is inflicted disproportionately on black and brown skinned persons.

In 1829 Pennsylvanian Quakers introduced the practice of solitary confinement with good intentions. They thought that solitude would encourage remorse and repentance. When they saw to their horror the hell that their good intentions created -- the incalculable harm and suffering caused -- they became the ones to repent. They renounced the practice and called for it to be ended.

Now is the time for Connecticut to change its practices and to align itself with several other states, including neighboring New York and New Jersey, that have already passed legislation to limit the use of solitary and to institutionalize humane alternatives. SB 459 offers a strategic way to do just that, with provisions such as (1) limiting the use of harmful isolation practices and incrementally increasing minimums for time out of cell; (2) providing much needed accountability with the creation of the office of an ombuds and the Advisory Commission for Correctional Oversight; (3) implementing training and other strategies to promote correctional officer wellness, as well as other such critical provisions.

To be sure, changing a culture that has included the use of the dehumanizing and extra-judicial punishment of solitary cannot be done in one step. It will be a process. That said, SB 459 constitutes a huge and necessary first step. I urge, and thank you for, your support for enacting SB 459 into law.

Gratefully,

The Rev. Allie Perry
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