Testimony in Support of SB 459  
March 25, 2022

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

My name is Nandhana Sajeev and I am a resident of Trumbull CT. In my personal, professional, and academic life, I am enormously concerned about the devastating impacts of mass incarceration, especially on victims of sexual violence. As a result, I am wholly in support of the Protect Act SB 459, because I believe that it will pave the way for a safer future.

It is first important to accept the fact that prisons are centers of racialized and sexualized violence. This is seen in the disproportionate rates of Black, Brown, and LGBTQ+ identifying persons who are incarcerated. Furthermore, the abuse to prison pipeline primarily impacts young Black women. Instead of treating young people who are suffering from sexual violence and other types of abuse, some survivors, especially young Black girls, are criminalized for the ways they experience and navigate trauma. According to the Georgetown Law Center report, The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline, 45% of girls and 24% of boys in juvenile justice systems experience five or more adverse childhood experiences. In localized studies across the country, as many 93% of girls in juvenile systems are survivors of sexual assault. Prisons and our carceral system do not make us safer. They are in fact a public health crisis, one that is made more evident during the pandemic, and exacerbate inequalities, compound traumas, and destabilize communities.

Across the country and in Connecticut, it is practice for survivors of sexual violence who are incarcerated to be placed in solitary confinement after reporting. I know this from my own extensive research and connections with criminalized survivors and their advocates. This is ostensibly done to protect survivors. However, as we know, solitary confinement is an incredibly regressive and violent practice. United Nations Human Rights experts refer specifically to Connecticut DOC’s use of forced isolation as dehumanizing, repressive, and akin to psychological torture. This is only part of the story. Carceral facilities all over the country, and certainly in Connecticut, foster a culture of isolation. In higher level security spaces, people who are incarcerated face 20+ hours a day in their cells, what Stop Solitary Connecticut describes as extreme isolation. Furthermore, frequent lockdowns exacerbate an atmosphere of anxiety, danger, and dehumanization. The practice of solitary confinement is but one aspect of carceral facilities’ institutionalized isolation. The practice of solitary confinement essentially retraumatizes, often mimicking the role of abusers, incarcerated people, most of whom are survivors of sexual and domestic violence.
SB 459 will be a powerful change to Connecticut’s carceral systems. The limits around the use of solitary confinement will ensure that incarcerated individuals will not be subjected to extreme psychological torture. It also gives an opportunity for DOC to move away from such measures and start to build an environment where they won’t need to rely on such practices at all. It will protect social bonds by ensuring that incarcerated individuals can still be in contact with their loved ones, thus breaking the cultural and institutionalized isolation of our carceral facilities. I am also particularly interested in the focus of correctional officer wellness. Prisons are not a safe and rehabilitative space for anyone, including the people who are employed by it. By creating a safer and trauma-informed environment for correctional officers, we would be decreasing the overall risk level of prisons as well as lower the rates of sexual victimization.

I want to emphasize the importance of the Office of Corrections Ombuds and Correction Accountability Commission. This for me is the most important part of the bill. It ensures ongoing cooperation between correctional facilities and the community, including various kinds of anti-violence advocates. Unfortunately, the commission aspect of this bill has been removed when it was voted out of the Judiciary Committee. I do not expect nor want the Department of Corrections to completely undertake the massive responsibility of safety and rehabilitation of incarcerated people. That is a responsibility that all of us must hold, that many people and communities across the state actually desire to take on. This commission and position will facilitate ongoing transparency, accountability, and partnerships that will create not only a safer carceral environment, but a safer and healthier community. This includes being able to provide services for survivors of sexual violence who are also system-involved, regardless of when and where their victimization has happened. This type of partnership that empowers non-incarcerated advocates and loved ones will be critical to improving our public health and wellness, including interrupting devastating cycles of violence like the abuse to prison pipeline. SB 459 will be instrumental in creating a safer society from lowering recidivism to improving correctional officer wellness to supporting system-involved survivors of sexual violence.

I strongly support S.B. 459 and urge you to favorably vote the bill out of the Judiciary Committee, with the inclusion of the Corrections Accountability Commission, as well. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Nandhana Sajeev
Trumbull, CT