Testimony of Mary Valdovinos
Operations Manager - Women Against Mass Incarceration
In Support of S.B. 459 – The Protect Act

March 24, 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 Mary Valdovinos, and I am providing testimony today in support of Senate Bill 459, otherwise known as The Protect Act. I am a resident of Norwalk and the Operations Manager at Women Against Mass Incarceration. I am also a formerly incarcerated woman who spent over a third of my life in this system. As a young girl, I made a choice that changed the course of my life. Despite this, I know I am not defined by my past and dedicate my time today to helping others and creating change in our communities.

The actuality of inhumane conditions for incarcerated people is far worse than what is portrayed on television or reported during audits, and often, we are subjected to abuse that nobody should endure. Treatment such as this only exacerbates mental illness and trauma. Even worse, solitary confinement is a common recourse for punishment to which there are alternatives. During my incarceration, I spent time in and experienced the horrid conditions of solitary confinement, the same that thousands of individuals suffer through daily. For those who may not know, incarceration is punishment enough.

There is no reason for a person to be shackled or placed in extreme isolation when they are already imprisoned. When combined - confinement, abusive restraints, and negligence - can lead to injury and even death. I was put in black box restraints after being confused for the wrong person and “looking the wrong way”. At the time, I remember thinking this was a huge mistake and feeling blindsided, moreover, it was cruel. It is a moment I will never forget. Situations such as these are by no means okay. On top of that, those incarcerated must rely on staff to “allow” basic human rights such as hygiene or eating. When prisons are understaffed, one can go several days without a shower or phone call to loved ones. Such things can severely impact a person’s mental and emotional wellbeing.

One may think that once you are out, these situations are behind us, but that is not the case. I still remember my incarceration, which was made worse by the way I was isolated and treated within solitary confinement. My own situation could have been handled differently with the proper resources and support. However, the first recourse always seems to be confinement. When one is already in such a low place, it does not help to completely lose contact with our loved ones or to be treated like we are worthless.
The Protect Act calls for outside oversight of the Department of Corrections. As seen by the number of abuses and violations, it is evident that accountability and reporting have been placed on the backburner for far too long. Just as those incarcerated are held accountable, so should the CT D.O.C. I know that I am just one of many justice-impacted individuals in the state, but I hope that you hear my voice today for those inside whose voices may not be heard. If we want to see change, we must be the change.

It is time we put an end to this torture. In support of SB 459, I urge you to favorably vote the bill out of the Judiciary Committee.

Thank you for your time.

-Mary Valdovinos.