

Testimony in Support of SB 1196
Submitted by Chasity West

March 15, 2023

Dear Senator Winfield, Senator Stafstrom, Senator Kissel, Representative Fishbein, and Distinguished Members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Chasity West. In solidarity with Stop Solitary CT, I stand in support of SB 1196, An Act Concerning Procedures of the Department of Correction, Relating to Strip Searches and the Transfer of Persons Who Are Incarcerated Between Correctional Facilities. Below I will exclusively be providing testimony on the part of the bill that addresses strip searching.

As someone who has been incarcerated at York Correctional Institution for many years, I am well qualified to speak about strip searches, a practice I have been forced to undergo innumerable times. Strip searches are one of the most humiliating and intrusive allowances that occur in prison facilities. They serve little practical value and are often both misused and overused in penal institutions. For example, they are sometimes used as punishment when a prisoner says or does something that makes a guard angry. To quote a supervisor, sometimes it's done just to "remind them that they're inmates." Very little contraband is recovered during most strip searches as most unauthorized or illegal items are not conveyed by outside visitors it's usually an inside job.

Not only are strip searches highly invasive but they are also extremely sexualized, erotic even. Many residents consider this act "a state sanctioned strip tease" or even view it as "visual rape". During a strip search, before the gaze of a same-sex guard, an incarcerated woman is required to remove each item of clothing until she is completely naked. The guard dons latex gloves and fingers through the items one by one. The woman is made to stand barefoot on a dirty tiled floor and face the guard as she canvases her naked body from head to toe. If her hair is up she is instructed to let it down and tousle it. The guard then instructs her to open her mouth so she can peer inside, and the woman must lift and flick her tongue. If the woman is wearing dentures she is required to remove them before the guard conducts the oral exam, subjecting her to further humiliation. After her mouth is examined, the woman must lift her breasts. Corpulent women are instructed to lift their belly as well. The woman is then ordered to face the wall so that the guard can examine her backside. She is then instructed to show the soles of her feet. Finally, the guard directs her to bend at the waist, pull her buttocks open as to fully expose her anus, vulva and vaginal orifice, and cough, ostensibly to propel any concealed item from her

body. If she is menstruating she must remove her tampon in full view of the guard and perform this bend, squat, and cough routine just the same. A notoriously crass and demeaning command some guards issue while a woman is in this most vulnerable position is to "show me the pink ". Meaning to stretch one's vagina so completely open that the guard is able to view up into the woman's vaginal canal. At this point, after the guard has visually examined the woman's most intimate parts to her satisfaction, the woman is instructed to get dressed. If new hires are undergoing on-the-job training, they are permitted to observe the strip search without the woman's consent.

There have been a few incidents where a female guard has brought lubricant into the strip room. I personally know of only two women who have experienced this, and both women refused to allow the guard to perform this highly illegal internal examination. Nothing was done on either occasion when these incidents were reported.

Even though in most cases the one conducting the strip search must be of the same biological sex, many of the guards performing these highly intimate searches are intensely masculine, which further underscores the utter disregard of an incarcerated woman's femininity and humanity. Although many guards attempt to minimize humiliation as they perform these searches, there are an equal number who aim to maximize the degradation of the experience by making inappropriate and derogatory comments during the search. Some even have been later found gossiping with fellow coworkers about the the appearance of a woman's body or her level of hygiene, talk that spreads through the prison like wildfire.

No matter how much sensitivity is applied during a search, the strip search by its very nature is vulgar and uncivilized. Not only that, it is eerily reminiscent of the bodily searches African captives endured when brought to the auction block. While these slaves were considered chattel, incarcerated people are often referred to as "state property" by our keepers. In both cases neither group of people owned their bodies or had legal protection from such bodily violations. Strip searches therefore confirm that there are elements of colonialism in both the system's structure and the practices it relies upon. And no one is exempt. I've witnessed elderly wheelchair bound woman struggle to their feet from their chairs, remove their wig, and be ushered into the strip cell where they too are made to peel open their buttocks in front of a guard that could be their grandchild.

Although a degree of privacy is provided while strip searches are conducted (for example, portable screens are erected in the gymnasium) male staff freely walk about the immediate vicinity and can peer into areas where these searches take

place, even if done accidentally. I recall one instance when a female guard approached the cell to strip search both myself and my roommate, a woman upwards of 300 lbs. As the female guard entered the cell a male guard, out of the dozen present, followed her to the room and stuck his booted foot into the doorway to keep the door ajar. His head turned away for "privacy", his female coworker proceeded with the search. As my fully disrobed roommate pulled her butt cheeks apart, bent deeply over and coughed, the male guard simultaneously blew a raspberry, imitating the sound of passing gas. This incident proves just how present and participatory this male prison guard was in the strip search, even if his presence and participation was superfluous. There is no real privacy in prison or protection from this type of obnoxious conduct.

The entire prison population is subjected to these invasive searches anytime a staff member misplaces an object, even when a strip search is wildly impractical. For example, women at this facility have been placed on lock down and uniformly strip searched for lost items ranging from a fetal heart monitor, handcuffs, a tool box, and a 16" metal ladle. Discretion and common sense are never applied in any of these instances. Be it an pencil or a person if either go missing there will be strip searches all around.

The practice of strip searches continually reminds us women that, the moment we enter a prison, not only does our body no longer belong to us, but now it has also become a spectacle, an object of corporeal exploitation. Most women in prison have already been sexually violated, and by allowing these searches, the state of Connecticut is sanctioning the continuation of this cycle of objectification and violence. For these reasons and so many more, I strongly urge you to pass SB 1196 and adopt practices that realistically meet the need for security while respecting incarcerated people's dignity and humanity.

Respectfully submitted by Chasity West 266589
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