

November 26, 2024

Connecticut Correction Advisory Committee
Capitol Building, Room 011
Connecticut General Assembly

Re: 60-Day Update from the Interim Correction Ombudsman

Dear Members of the Correction Advisory Committee,

I am pleased to provide you with a detailed update on the activities and progress of the Ombudsman's office during the first 60 days of my tenure, which began on September 23, 2024. This period has been crucial for establishing the office, building relationships with key stakeholders, and initiating essential operations. I am deeply appreciative of the Committee's ongoing support as we work toward fulfilling our mandate.

1. Early Engagement and Resource Gathering

Upon assuming the role of Interim Correction Ombudsman, I immediately began engaging with incarcerated individuals and their families. To date, approximately 90 individuals and their loved ones have reached out seeking the services of the Ombudsman. These early communications underscore the significant need for our office and highlight the vital role we will play in providing oversight and advocacy.

My first priority was establishing the necessary resources and infrastructure for the Ombudsman's office. Key meetings during this time have been instrumental in gathering resources and setting the foundation for our work:

- **Governor's Office:** I held several meetings with the Governor's staff, including the Chief of Staff and General Counsel, to understand the state's vision and secure support for the office. Additionally, the Governor's policy team connected me with the Office of the New Jersey Correction Ombudsman, whose insights have been invaluable as I structure our office and address early-stage needs.
- **Office of the Child Advocate:** I met with the Office of the Child Advocate, which oversees incarcerated youth at Manson Youth Institute and York Correctional Institution. Their guidance on coordinating facility inspections and developing comprehensive reports will aid in our oversight functions.
- **Office of Policy and Management (OPM):** Ongoing discussions with OPM's Undersecretary of Criminal Justice and the budget office have been essential in securing resources and allocating funding for our office's expansion and operations.

2. Collaboration with the Department of Correction

Building a strong relationship with the Department of Correction (DOC) has been central to our efforts. Key interactions include:

- **October 2 Meeting with DOC Leadership:** I met with Commissioner Quiros and other DOC leaders to discuss the transfer of information and clarify the role of the

Ombudsman's office. The DOC has been responsive and cooperative in providing necessary information.

- **Requests for Documentation:** In the first 60 days, we received key documents from DOC, including all security division investigations from 2023 and 2024, organizational charts, and administrative policies. A secure portal has been established for accessing critical documents, including inmate files and medical records.
- **November 19 Meeting with DOC Intelligence Unit:** I met with the DOC intelligence unit to improve communication with incarcerated individuals. A plan was developed to use toll-free lines within each facility, enabling individuals to contact the Ombudsman's office directly and securely, without cost. Additionally, tablets will be used to distribute information about our services, ensuring transparency and accessibility.
- **October 16 Meeting with Food Services Unit:** I discussed food services with the DOC to address concerns regarding the feeding of individuals in DOC care, a matter that continues to generate significant feedback.

3. Engagement with Incarcerated Individuals at MacDougall-Walker

In a significant and urgent development, I met three times with a group of incarcerated individuals at MacDougall-Walker who had initiated a hunger strike. Through these meetings, I worked directly with the individuals to address their concerns, engaging in constructive dialogue to understand the root of their grievances. After intensive discussions and collaborative problem-solving, I was able to work with the individuals to resolve the key issues at hand, resulting in their agreement to end the hunger strike. This was a positive outcome that not only helped de-escalate a potentially volatile situation but also reinforced the Ombudsman's role in ensuring the humane treatment of incarcerated individuals.

Additionally, in my capacity as the Ombudsman, I appeared as counsel in a legal proceeding concerning the force-feeding of one of the hunger strikers. I participated in the injunction process to prevent the use of force-feeding, advocating for the individual's rights and well-being. This involvement highlights the critical role of the Ombudsman's office in both advocating for individual rights and intervening in high-stakes legal and ethical matters.

4. Public Engagement and Media Coverage

As part of our ongoing efforts to raise awareness about the Ombudsman's office and the issues facing incarcerated individuals, I participated in an interview with CT NPR, which was subsequently featured in CT Mirror and other statewide publications. The interview provided an opportunity to discuss the mission of the Ombudsman's office, its role in ensuring accountability within the correctional system, and the work we are doing to improve the conditions of confinement in Connecticut. This media exposure has been instrumental in increasing public awareness and supporting our advocacy for systemic reform.

5. Recent Developments: Office Operations

- **Office Supplies:** On November 12, 2024, the Ombudsman's office received its first shipment of essential office supplies, marking a key milestone in our operational readiness. These supplies will support the increasing volume of communications from individuals and their families.

- **Office Space:** I am happy to report that the Ombudsman’s office has been allocated a fully furnished suite at 55 Farmington Avenue, Hartford, CT. This space, complete with eight workstations, will be crucial as our office continues to grow and carry out its responsibilities.

6. Engagement with Advocacy and Allied Organizations

In addition to collaborating with DOC, I have also engaged with several advocacy and allied organizations:

- **Stop Solitary Event on October 4, 2024:** I spoke at this event, alongside legislative leaders and Inspector General Robert Devlin, where we highlighted the role of the Ombudsman’s office in advocating for humane treatment and oversight in Connecticut’s correctional system.
- **Healthcare Workforce Safety Working Group:** I participated in discussions on policies that ensure the safety of healthcare workers when treating formerly incarcerated individuals, following a tragic incident involving a nurse at a halfway house.
- **Yale Medical Legal Partnership:** I worked with this group to improve re-entry services, including obtaining state-issued IDs for individuals discharged from DOC. Meetings with DOC officials and the DMV Commissioner were held to advance this initiative.
- **Katal Center for Health, Equity, and Justice:** I met with the Katal Center to discuss the Ombudsman’s vision and ensure our office’s responsiveness to community needs and alignment with criminal justice reform.
- **Wesleyan University ACLU:** On November 12, 2024, I spoke to around 20 students from the Wesleyan University ACLU about the Ombudsman’s work and the challenges incarcerated individuals face. This engagement with the next generation of leaders is crucial to raising awareness of our mission.

7. Recent Developments

On November 25, 2024, the office received its state-issued vehicle, another milestone in our operational development. We are planning statewide facility inspections starting in December, which will be an essential part of our oversight duties. Additionally, we are initiating the process of hiring administrative and support staff to strengthen the office’s capacity.

8. Looking Ahead: My Priorities

As we move forward, I will focus on expanding the Ombudsman’s office’s capacity to effectively address the concerns of incarcerated individuals and their families. Key priorities for the coming months include:

- Expanding staff resources to manage the growing volume of requests and investigations.
- Enhancing transparency by improving communication with stakeholders, including incarcerated individuals, DOC staff, and the public.
- Focusing on systemic reforms in healthcare, food services, and re-entry programs.
- Preparing a legislative package to support the Ombudsman’s work and propose necessary reforms in the correctional system.
- Finalizing the PA 22-18 report for the 2025 legislative session, detailing our activities, findings, and recommendations to improve correctional oversight and conditions.

- Launching a website and social media presence to increase public awareness and accessibility to our services, allowing individuals to file complaints and stay informed about our initiatives.

I look forward to working closely with the Committee and all relevant stakeholders to achieve these goals. Thank you for the opportunity to provide this update. I welcome any feedback or suggestions as we continue this critical work.

Sincerely,
DeVaughn Ward, Esq.

Interim Correction Ombudsman
devaughn.ward@ct.gov
860-936-2314

Media Links:

[Criminal justice organization spotlights deaths in state DOC custody](#), Yale Daily News, 10/6/24

[Two CT inmates end weekslong hunger strike, cite raised awareness of concerns about prison system](#), CT Insider, 10/10/24

[Connecticut's new prison ombudsman wants better medical care for incarcerated people](#), CT Mirror/CT Public Radio, 11/19/24