

Stop Solitary CT Testimony on Raised Bill No. 987, An Act Concerning Reinvestment of Savings Achieved Through a Reduction in Correctional Facility Population into Reentry and Community-Based Services and Programs

Good morning Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, and esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Joseph Gaylin and I am a Steering Committee Member of Stop Solitary CT. I am testifying on behalf of the organization about raised Bill 987, An Act Concerning Reinvestment of Savings Achieved Through a Reduction in Correctional Facility Population into Reentry and Community-Based Services and Programs.

In spirit, Stop Solitary CT supports this legislation. Funds from the closure of prisons must be earmarked to support formerly incarcerated people and protect the lives of those still behind bars. In particular, we are supportive of the initiative to hire formerly incarcerated community health workers.

However, in the case of legislation the devil is so often hidden in the details, or lack thereof. We are concerned that this proposed legislation would fund reentry efforts housed in the Department of Correction. Moreover, the funds allocated to the DOC do not include any mechanism for accountability. The terminology employed throughout this legislation speaks broadly about “community-based organizations,” which, in the parlance of the DOC, can mean anything from halfway houses to parole officers. As a result, we fear this bill could merely shift funding around the Department of Correction, rather than meaningfully support formerly incarcerated people and their communities, as is the intent of the legislation.

Similarly, the history of justice reinvestment legislation in Connecticut and nationwide should teach us that funding technical assistance providers is not the same thing as meaningfully investing in marginalized communities. Absent language specifying which communities will receive funds, which organizations in marginalized communities will receive funds, or which individuals will receive funds, we believe the legislation must, at minimum, outline a framework for community oversight. Without these specifications or meaningful community oversight, we fear that this legislation will fall prey to the mistakes of past justice reinvestment initiatives.

In our work to end solitary confinement, we support the creation of a correction accountability commission, staffed largely by formerly incarcerated people that would inform the work of the proposed Correction Ombuds. A similar structure is necessary to empower directly impacted communities to take ownership over justice reinvestment. Who better to evaluate community based reentry programs than those who have experienced the transition from prisons back to their communities?

Thank you for your time and for facilitating a public conversation around real justice reinvestment in Connecticut.