

TESTIMONY FOR SB 987 MARCH 10, 2021 submitted by Robert J. Gillis

Good day, Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, Senator Kissel, Representative Fishbein and members of the Joint Committee...

My name is Robert J. Gillis. I am a resident of New Haven and I am speaking in reference to SB 987, which advocates for the reinvestment of costs avoided by prison closings into community support and reentry services. I am also a member of the Steering Committee of STOP SOLITARY CT.

My personal experience, having worked in DOC for 36 years, has given me the advantage of a range of opportunities. I began my career as the lead counselor in a work release program at New Haven CC, and I came to experience first-hand the frustrations and disappointments encountered by those who are faced with the challenge of establishing an independent and productive lifestyle without adequate social supports. Many succeeded, but most failed.

I ended my career as the Director of Parole and Community Services, after having served as a prison Warden in three different facilities. The problems which the criminal justice system was wrestling with at the time that I retired were the same that I encountered in my first assignment. I am skeptical, however, that SB 987 is an adequate pathway toward re-investment—and I in no way am downplaying the need for additional funding. In its current form, the bill is a good idea, but needs more work for a successful execution.

In reviewing the text of the current draft, I note very few significant differences between the current sections 18-81w and 18-81z and the recommended modifications: the clear responsibility for DOC to assess the needs of individual incarcerated persons and to fashion a response by the development of a re-entry plan. There is added recognition that homelessness and mental health issues have major influence in recidivism, but there is scant recognition of the means by which these and similar factors, once identified, can be remedied.

It would appear that the bill places high operational emphasis on referral and brokering conducted by professional DOC staff. But I have questions:

>Does the establishment of a new layer of administration by the so-called Office of Reentry Supports improve the likely outcomes?

>How can the success of these initiatives be measured? I know that the bill mandates reporting to Judiciary, but there is nothing new to this requirement, having first been established as an **annual** responsibility since 2008. If this practice is continued as is, where are changes in reentry service delivery to be introduced? What have we learned from the reports of the intervening 12 years? What **really** works, and what recidivism studies for Connecticut can be used as an effective map to chart our future?

>Should DOC be granted the budgetary adjustment, or would it be more productive to direct the funds to Labor for offender-specific apprenticeship programs, for example, and to Social Services for homeless aid? Has anyone looked into mentoring or sponsorship programs? In the

current scheme of things, DOC has a substantial appropriation for halfway house and supportive housing. Will the current model suffice, or are we simply directing money to continue what now may or may not be working?

These are only a few of the questions which have gestated in my thought process, but I leave one final comment:

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As part of the PROTECT ACT, we at Stop Solitary have identified the need for an oversight and monitoring component for DOC. The establishment of this entity could provide the guidance and policy direction required to respond to the questions which I have raised. Funding is recommended there also.