



State of Connecticut COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 2, Hartford, CT 06103

Promoting Equality and Justice for all People

Public Safety and Security Committee Public Hearing – March 9, 2021

CHRO Testimony Regarding:

HB 6597- AAC Accreditation, Reporting Requirements, Mental Health, Data Storage Services and Training of Law Enforcement Officers

HB 6598 - AAC the Prohibition Against Hiring Police Officers Dismissed for Malfeasance or Who Resigned or Retired While Under Investigation

SB 120 - AA Allowing Police Officers to Wear Religious Head Coverings as Part of a Police Uniform

SB 122 - AA Establishing a Unit Within the Division of State Police to Investigate Hate Crimes and Criminal Acts Committed by Extremist Groups

Good morning Senator Bradley, Representative Horn, Senator Champagne, Representative Green, and members of the Public Safety and Security Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of HB 6597, AAC Accreditation, Reporting Requirements, Mental Health, Data Storage Services and Training of Law Enforcement Officers; HB 6598, AAC The Prohibition Against Hiring Police Officers Dismissed for Malfeasance or Who Resigned or Retired While Under Investigation; SB 120, AA Allowing Police Officers to Wear Religious Head Coverings as Part of a Police Uniform; and SB 122, AA Establishing a Unit Within the Division of State Police to Investigate Hate Crimes and Criminal Acts Committed by Extremist Groups.

HB 6597 AAC Accreditation, Reporting Requirements, Mental Health, Data Storage Services and Training of Law Enforcement Officers

The Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities supports HB 6597 which, among other things, would require training for police officers on how to interact with persons with mental or physical disabilities and to provide funding for body cams and the storage of body cam footage.

The Commission protects individuals with mental disabilities and has a particular interest in ensuring that these individuals' civil rights are upheld while experiencing a crisis. When someone contacts emergency services seeking assistance for themselves or for someone else experiencing a mental health crisis, it is imperative that the responders are equipped to de-escalate and assist the individual. Tragically, across the nation we have seen the fatal consequences of inadequate safeguards and training when someone calls 911 for psychiatric assistance and loses their life in response. In fact, of the approximately 5,000 fatal police shootings throughout the country over the past six years, about 25% involved someone police identified as in the throes of a mental health crisis.¹

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/police-mentally-ill-deaths/2020/10/17/8dd5bcf6-0245-11eb-b7ed-141dd88560ea_story.html

Inadequate mental health awareness and crisis intervention training may also have a disproportionate impact on communities of color, particularly on Black and Latinx communities. While their rates of mental health disorders may not significantly differ from the general population, Black and Latinx communities have substantially lower access to mental health treatment, let alone culturally responsive care. The Commission supports police training to ensure that all Connecticut residents receive the de-escalation assistance they need in times of crisis.

HB 6598 AAC the Prohibition Against Hiring Police Officers Dismissed for Malfeasance or Who Resigned or Retired While Under Investigation

The Commission supports HB 6598 which prevents the re-hire or re-certification of any officer dismissed for malfeasance or who resigned under investigation for such serious misconduct. This is an urgent matter of trust in our public safety institutions. Law enforcement officers are entrusted with extraordinary power to use physical and sometimes deadly force against their fellow citizens in order to enforce the law. When that trust is violated, the officers who committed that violation are too often reshuffled into a different department where they are once again put into a position of trust and authority. This practice harms faith in the entire institution of law enforcement by undermining officer accountability. Preventing the re-hire of those who have already been shown to have abused their power is a commonsense measure that would help restore public trust in law enforcement. This is particularly necessary in restoring the trust of communities of color who too often see their family and friends face abuses of power only to see their abuser re-hired without consequence.

SB 120 AA Allowing Police Officers to Wear Religious Head Coverings as Part of a Police Uniform

The Commission supports SB 120 which allows officers to wear religious head coverings as part of their uniform. Many religious traditions require their members to wear head coverings of some kind. This includes, for example, certain Jewish communities who wear yarmulkes and Sikhs who cover their hair by a dastar, or turban. Police officers should not be forced to choose between following the practices of their faith as protected by law and a career in law enforcement. Reasonable accommodation for religious practices is required by the law when it is not an undue hardship for the employer. This accommodation has no cost to the employer and serves to both acknowledge the employees right to practice their faith and show acceptance to the community.

SB 122 AA Establishing a Unit Within the Division of State Police to Investigate Hate Crimes and Criminal Acts Committed by Extremist Groups

The Commission supports SB 122 to create a Hate Crimes and Extremist Group Investigative Unit that is required to publish data on the number of hate crimes committed in the state. As members of the committee are well aware, hate crimes are on the rise.² The Commission has heard from communities around the state that they have seen a spike in discrimination, particularly among the Asian community facing violence and hatred in connection to the pandemic. While the Commission is fighting this discrimination in employment, housing, and in places of public accommodation, a more focused effort from police departments is needed to combat discrimination when it escalates into crime. A key part of that effort is publishing the data on hate crimes both to raise public awareness of the issue and to craft targeted strategies to eliminate violence against members of our communities based on their protected class status.

² <https://www.courant.com/nation-world/ct-nw-us-hate-crime-fbi-report-20201116-7zb6af73fbhipcc5z56unuk4ce-story.html>