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Margaret Middleton, CEO, Columbus House, Inc.
Testimony Supporting SB 572:
An Act Concerning Community Crisis Response Teams and Reentry Centers.
Legislative Office Building
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Representative Maria Horn, Senator Dennis Bradley, Senator Catherine Osten, Representative Alphonse Paolillo, and distinguished members of the Public Safety and Security Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Margaret Middleton, I am the CEO of Columbus House, a Connecticut-based 501 (c) 3 non-profit homeless services organization with programs in New Haven, New London, Hartford, and Middlesex counties. Columbus House provides emergency shelter, street outreach, case management, employment services, housing assistance, employment services, programs for those exiting incarceration, and a host of programs designed to help people secure safe, stable, and affordable housing. The organization was founded in New Haven in 1982 and our main administrative offices remain in New Haven at 586 Ella T. Grasso Boulevard.

As a social service agency that annually provides services for close to 2,800 of our most vulnerable citizens, Columbus House supports SB 572 because it will tackle issues that disproportionately affect communities of color. The Community Crisis Response Team will limit unneeded contact with law enforcement by dispatching appropriately qualified professionals to respond to 9-1-1 and non-emergency calls related to welfare checks, homelessness, substance use disorder and mental health crises. This program will create a support system to deal with individuals that should not be incarcerated but provided with the opportunity to get connected to treatment, services, and programs during their moments of crisis. This social service approach to law enforcement will reduce the incarceration rate and divert people from unnecessary visits to the emergency room. Police have been tasked with responding to many social issues that they are inappropriately equipped for. As the nation and state call for social justice and reimagining policing, SB 572 seeks to enhance first responses and reduce repeat emergency calls, while getting constituents the help that police officers don't have the training, resources, or time to provide.

We also support SB 572 because it is the first step to ensuring that men and women returning home from incarceration have better chances to reintegrate into our community. Columbus House has, for decades, provided services for this at-risk and vulnerable group. People returning home from incarceration are disproportionately affected by issues related to housing, employment, substance use disorder, mental illness, and chronic medical illness. We recall the days when those being released from incarceration were literally dropped off down-town or at one of our shelters with no belongings, no money, and no hope. The Reentry Welcome Centers will ensure that people are connected to vital services on the day of their release. They will help people apply for public benefits, and provide continuing supports while people are already in the community.

From a fiscal perspective, SB 572 is a long-term investment to generate savings due to diversion from incarceration and the emergency room. From a human perspective, SB 572 provides the opportunity to fix systemic issues that disproportionately affect communities of color.

Summary of Columbus House experience dealing with those exiting incarceration.

DOC/DHRAP – Dept. of Corrections/Dept. of Housing Rental Assistance Program

Columbus House has been a partner in the Re-entry Center in New Haven since 2020. The Center is a crucial part of the release process for DOC clients. The clients are transported to Project Welcome Home for a warm handoff. The staff at PWH connects them to DSS and other community resources before another warm handoff to the Columbus House DOC case manager. The DOC case manager begins the housing location process before release from DOC so once they are done at PWH, the client can view units.

This process is integral when trying to house the clients directly from incarceration. Many times, if the client is not transported to PWH, they can get lost in the system. It is best that we have constant contact during release and transport and demonstrate that our programs are here to assist the client who is facing homelessness. The clients are grateful for our services and our attentiveness. Without PWH, they would be dropped off on the street or at shelter. The fact that they can circumvent the shelter process, makes them more secure in their reintegration and increases the probability of a positive outcome. To date, we have jointly worked with 21 clients – all have been housed.

CSSD – Court Support Services Division

Many of our CSSD referral clients reside at Project Moore. This transitional living program is an effective way to get recently released individuals prepared for independent housing. Our referrals come to us from the New Haven Office of Adult Probation. The individuals are identified by their probation officers and Project Moore staff as ready for our housing process. Once the referral is approved and received, the CSSD RRH (Rapid Re-Housing) case manager connects with the client and staff at Project Moore to begin the case management and housing process. The clients are easily located and contacted due to the accessibility of the Project Moore staff. We have had many successes due to the attentive staff and central location of Project Moore. Our clients are safely housed in the program until we can secure permanent, independent housing. Since our involvement commenced in 2019, 13 of the 19 clients referred from probation and staying at Project More were moved on to permanent housing.

We know from decades of experience working with this population that if the support services are available just prior to and upon release, the probability for a positive outcome is increased significantly. It is for these reasons that we respectfully implore you to pass this life-saving bill.