



Greater Hartford Legal Aid

Public Safety Committee, February 11, 2021

Testimony submitted by
Greater Hartford Legal Aid

SB 572: Support

My name is Alison Weir. I am the policy advocate and a staff attorney at Greater Hartford Legal Aid. I am writing in support of SB 572, an Act Concerning Crisis Response Teams and Reentry Centers. This bill disrupts the pathway to prison in two ways, first, by ensuring that the right type of response is provided to address people in crisis and then by ensuring that those reentering society have access to the tools to help them succeed in becoming productive members of their community.

GHLA does not do criminal work, but we do help ex-offenders get back on their feet. The challenges confronting reentering formerly incarcerated individuals can make returning to criminal activity a tempting alternative. According to a 2015 report by the Connecticut Office of Policy and Management, 64% of ex-offenders are rearrested within three years of release.ⁱ Reentering residents face difficulties getting the basics they need to survive, let alone thrive. Public housing authorities may not accept them as tenants so often they cannot even stay with a friend or a relative; and landlords are not barred from refusing to rent to ex-offenders. Jobs can be difficult to get, particularly in this tight job market, as many employers are reluctant to hire an ex-offender. So without a support structure in place, many ex-offenders find themselves on the street, possibly in the same situation (or worse) they were in before they entered the prison system. Unless we can break the cycle by giving people the tools they need to succeed as law-abiding citizens, too many people will continue to be trapped in an endless cycle of imprisonment, release, re-imprisonment, wasting human potential and making our communities poorer in so many ways. This cycle exacerbates racial injustice in the state as African Americans and other people of color are disproportionately involved in the criminal legal system, and so may be unable to access all the benefits of living in Connecticut without intervention and assistance. Thus, we strongly support the provision in this bill strengthening reentry centers.

GHLA is a formal partner of the Greater Hartford Reentry Welcome Center (Reentry Welcome Center), and we look forward to establishing an in-person presence at some point in the future. We are encouraged by the potential of such programs to make a real difference in our community. And our experience with the Reentry Welcome Center demonstrates that programs like the Reentry Welcome Center are needed. Since opening of its doors on September 17, 2018, the Reentry Welcome Center has seen 736 non-duplicated individuals who made 5,346 visits to the Center. Of the total number, 141 were direct transports from the

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Department of Correction because they had no other place to go. The need has been particularly acute during the pandemic. Since the public health emergency started in March 2020, GHRWC has had 70 drop-offs from DOC. Each individual transported to the Center, has received a charged cell phone with minutes, basic needs, hygiene bag, and other vouchers along with case management from the Reentry Welcome Center staff who can also connect reentering individuals to specialized services and supports.

Reentry centers are an important tool in helping reentering individuals obtain a steady foundation in the community from which they can build and contribute to their community. Individuals reentering the community from prison often find themselves without resources or any means of connecting to resources. Many of the elements necessary for getting back on one's feet are hard to obtain after a prison term. Connecting or reconnecting to the benefits to which they are entitled may not be easy without help. Benefits they may have had before entering prison may have been suspended, or they may qualify for new benefits they are unaware of given their changed circumstances. For example, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits are suspended when one enters prison and have to be reactivated once one exits the penal system. Rules for the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program are even harsher, as reinstatement is possible only if ex-offenders are released within twelve months of incarceration on parole, probation, or transitional supervision. If they are incarcerated for more than twelve months, payments are terminated. Reentering individuals may need some help in contacting the Social Security Administration in order to reinstate their benefits. By connecting the formerly incarcerated with community services like shelters, assistance programs, caseworkers, and even lawyers, reentry centers help reentering individuals secure a solid foundation to rebuild their life.

Additionally, over the last several years, we have all seen too many cases where police have been sent to address issues better addressed by social workers, mental health providers, or other professionals trained in issues of homelessness, substance abuse, mental health crises, or chronic health issues. The state's larger cities are already exploring use of Crisis Response Teams as a better way to address many of the calls to 9-1-1,ⁱⁱ but this should be an option for all of Connecticut's towns and cities. The potential for tragedy when a police officer is sent to address a noncriminal crisis is not confined to our large cities. We urge the legislature to pass this legislation and appropriately fund Crisis Response Teams and Reentry Centers throughout the state.

ⁱ Connecticut Office of Policy and Management, Recidivism in CT, 2008 Releases (2015) available at <https://portal.ct.gov/OPM/CJ-About/CJ-SAC/SAC-Sites/Recidivism-Study/Recidivism-Study>

ⁱⁱ See Town of Bloomfield, "Crisis Intervention Team" webpage, available at <https://www.bloomfieldct.gov/police/pages/crisis-intervention-team>; NBC Connecticut News website, "Hartford Mayor to Announce Civilian Crisis Response Team," June 18, 2020, available at

<https://www.nbcconnecticut.com/news/local/hartford-mayor-to-announce-civilian-crisis-response-team/2290039/>; NBC Connecticut News Website, "New Haven to Announce Community Crisis Response Team", Aug. 18, 2020, available at <https://www.nbcconnecticut.com/news/local/new-haven-to-announce-community-crisis-response-team/2320309/>