

February 22, 2021

Good evening Madam chair of Appropriations and other distinguished members. My name is Barbara Fair and a voter in West Haven. I am on the Steering Committee for Stop Solitary Ct, an organization seeking humane practices within Dept of Corrections. I am also founder of My Brother's Keeper another grassroots organization with like mission. Thank you for the opportunity to come before you this evening to urge you to restore Correctional Oversight funding to Connecticut's budget. The decision to restore the office of Ombudsmen is of utmost importance to protect the lives of the most vulnerable people in our state. The reason I say incarcerated people are the most vulnerable is because every state institution has external oversight to protect the people in state care. Why not Dept of Corrections?

Manson Youth which houses our children is under federal investigation due to the lack of effective state oversight. According to State youth advocates in 2013 one in 74 youth were determined by prison staff to need regular mental health services although 71 had history of struggling with mental health.

Connecticut is one of seven states with no type of correctional oversight and the only one in the Northeast. Connecticut is also high on the list of racial disparity among those they cage. Ct's general population is 72% Caucasian yet incarcerated population is 72% African American and Latinx. That alone begs the question what is going on in Criminal Justice in Connecticut and what mechanisms need to be in place to assure a highly segregated state is caring for those whom they may never see or interact.

One simply needs to take a look at the countless complaints from incarcerated people to officials and countless litigation against Ct Dept of Corrections to come to the conclusion that external oversight of Corrections is a no-brainer. Office of Ombudsmen was opened in 1980 after a prison riot. With a budget of \$300,000 they provided staff who investigated complaints from incarcerated people and worked with DOC to resolve them. It was repealed in 2009 under fiscal crisis. We need for it to be restored because our prisons are experiencing a human crisis.

When a woman delivers her baby in a toilet, a young boy dies within months of being incarcerated and other mysterious deaths, including suicides and suicide attempts and spiraling serious mental illness, created and exacerbated in isolation the people need answers and we can't get them from DOC.

Untimely deaths from COVID alone beg the need for external oversight. Twenty people died in less than a year of COVID hitting Ct prisons. Thousands were sickened. We can't depend on the department's public sharing for the truth. The mere fact they don't count 26-year-old dad, Caleb Jordan Martin, who died in a hospital in April, 2 days after a court ordered release from Whalley jail makes their info sharing questionable. Ct is one of 4 states, according to Pew Report that does not require a formal peer review when someone dies to determine if death was preventable. We desperately need external oversight and it should be a MUST not a question.

An article titled, "Dwindling oversight heightens concern over medical, mental health care for inmates" told many stories of abuse and neglect behind bars in Connecticut. In that article it was quoted "3,486 people have mental health disorders requiring regular treatment, 5,378 have mental health issues not receiving treatment". I urge you to care enough about all our citizens to restore funding for oversight.

Thank you for your time and undivided attention to this matter.