



Monday 22nd February, 2021

**Re: Appropriations Committee Public Hearing on the Governor's Proposed Budget Request to the Restoration of the Office of the Ombudsman**

Dear Appropriations Committee,

I am Catherine John, lead organizer for Black and Brown United In Action, located in New Haven, CT. Black and Brown United In Action recognizes that the state of Connecticut is currently under dire economic duress, but has an opportunity to save millions of dollars in lawsuit payouts by restoring the Office of the Ombudsman. We contend that had there been effective oversight within the Department of Corrections, relations amongst correctional officers would be less hostile, there would be a better understanding between correctional officers and inmates and many lives would not have been lost to COVID-19 and we hope to inspire legislators to appropriate money into the budget for ombudsmen within the Department of Corrections. In addition, this move of funding for the restoration of the Office of the Ombudsman would provide Angel Quiros, Commissioner of the Department of Corrections, a necessary resource to monitor conditions and service delivery systems, investigate complaints, report findings, propose changes, advocate for improvements, access appropriate care, and help to expose and reduce unlawful deficiencies.

By the end of 2020, many groups including My Brother's Keeper, Stop Solitary CT, the Katal Center for Equity, Health and Justice and the ACLU of Connecticut clamored for large-scale releases to protect inmates from catching COVID-19 in a correctional facility, where social distancing is virtually impossible and medical care has historically been strained. Their demands underscored a fast-growing urgency, inmates contracting and dying from COVID-19. As COVID-19 cases continued to rise across the state, the Department of Corrections was hit hard by the second wave of infections as three inmates died during the final week of 2020 and more than 450 inmates tested positive for the virus, while 300 of the 6000 members of the department recovered from the virus. As of January 28th, 2021, 19 inmates died from COVID-19, and the Osborn correctional facility was found to have the greatest number of deaths in the system. Most of the dead prisoners were either Black or Hispanic, nearly 72% of the larger prison population.

At the beginning of 2021, Black and Brown United In Action reached out for two separate incidents of correction officer misconduct to Angel Quiros, Commissioner of the Department of Corrections, neither of which have been fully addressed and resolved. On January 11th, we joined CAIR CT by reaching out to Mr. Quiros regarding an incident involving a corrections officer exhibiting Islamophobia toward a fellow correctional officer. Specifically, a corrections officer under Mr. Quiros' management, posted an Islamophobic picture on Facebook of five men hanging from a rope by their necks with the caption "Islamic Wind Chimes." Review of the materials showed that this corrections officer was also the subject of a complaint by a Muslim inmate alleging that he made disparaging comments about the month of Ramadan, during which Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset (GCI-2019-06-029). From further investigation we found that this corrections officer's social media profile raised questions about the

handling of policy violations. He described himself on his current Facebook page as an “Infidel” a clear reference by those who hold anti-Muslim beliefs that they are proudly not Muslim. He goes on to share, “Stand back and I will handle it” an allusion to President Trump’s declaration to the white supremacist Proud Boys group that they should, “Stand back and standby”. Again, note that this behavior mirrors that of those who participated in the attempted coup at the nation’s Capitol on January 6th, 2021.

Following that incident, on January 27th, Black and Brown United In Action contacted Mr. Quiros regarding ICE detainer and jail enforcement of a member of Unidad Latina en Accion, and asked for Mr. Quiros to review all ICE detainers in accordance with the January 20, 2021 DHS memorandum. The memo states clearly that these enforcement priorities apply to all discretionary enforcement actions when identifying and detaining noncitizens. This includes any enforcement in a jail or prison setting including the issuance of an ICE detainer or notification requests, interrogations of incarcerated individuals, and transfers of individuals into ICE’s custody. Although Mr. Quiros received and acknowledged this information and the request, and despite being assured by the Attorney General’s office that the individual would have been released once we went down to the facility, we were unable to do so because the racist correctional officer we encountered at the facility refused to release the individual and we were forced to wait until the wrongfully detained was seen in court on February 1st, 2021 to pay the bail for him to be released.

We requested to meet with Mr. Quiros and legislators to review these matters, and have not received a response or follow up to our stated concerns. We recognize that Mr. Quiros has limited capacity and time to review all complaints and concerns, and aware of the financial, mental and emotional impact of these matters. We hope that you as well as other state leaders support funding for the restoration of the Office of the Ombudsman who will have the capacity to conduct unbiased investigations of the incidents, monitor conditions and service delivery system, report findings, propose changes, advocate for improvements, access appropriate care, and help to expose and reduce unlawful deficiencies.

Sincerely,

Catherine John  
Lead Organizer  
Black and Brown United in Action