



February 26th, 2021

Re: Testimony for Testimony for HB.6439

Dear Appropriations Committee,

Black and Brown United In Action is a grassroots organization located in New Haven, Connecticut. In recent years, prison officials have increasingly turned to solitary confinement as a way to manage difficult or dangerous prisoners. Many of the prisoners subjected to isolation, which can extend for years, have serious mental illness, and the conditions of solitary confinement can exacerbate their symptoms or provoke recurrence. Prison rules for isolated prisoners, however, greatly restrict the nature and quantity of mental health services that they can receive. For our friend, comrade and Stop Solitary CT activist Barbara Fair, solitary confinement is an inhumane aspect of corrections which she has fought for several years and contends to be an exploitation of the use of force and bad investment of state funds, and we agree. Ms. Fair son's pretrial cell in the Northern Correctional Institution was described as tight and example of the exploitation of the use of force and as she will explain misappropriation of funds as she has described the exploding investment into corrections without question or recall or need for evidence of expenditures which included massive overtime payments, solitary confinement and little to no rehabilitation. Instead, the Connecticut Correctional system is an institutionalized version of cheap labor as opposed to investment into one of the most marginalized sections of the black and brown communities, the incarcerated.

The original purpose of confining a person within a prison was not to punish them, but was a means of keeping the perpetrator of a crime detained until the actual punishment could be carried out. This was usually in the form of corporal punishment that was intended to cause the guilty person pain, such as being beaten with a whip, or capital punishment which used a variety of methods to claim the lives of condemned individuals. London is known as the birthplace of modern imprisonment. A Philosopher named Jeremy Bentham was against the death penalty and thus created a concept for a prison that would be used to hold prisoners as a form of punishment. Bentham drew up plans for a facility in which prisoners would remain for extended periods of time. His design was intended to ensure that the people who were locked up would never know if they were being watched by guards or not, which he felt would allow the prison to save money. Since the inmates could not be certain how many guards were present, Bentham reasoned, fewer officers would need to be hired to maintain the peace. In the end, this prison was never built, but the concept of using prisons as a form of long term punishment did catch on.

By the 19th century, prisons were being built for the sole purpose of housing inmates. They were intended to deter people from committing crimes. People who were found guilty of various crimes would be sent to these penitentiaries and stripped of their personal freedoms. Inmates were often forced to do hard labor while they were incarcerated and to live in very harsh conditions, similar to what many experienced at the Northern Correctional Facility. Since the early 1970s, the United States has engaged in a historically unprecedented expansion of its imprisonment systems at both the federal and state level. Since 1973, the number of incarcerated persons in the United States has increased five-fold, and in a given year 7,000,000 people were under the supervision or control of correctional services in the United States.

The prison environment, the rules and regulations and lack of personal control can all have an impact on prisoner's mental health. Older prisoners, those with a physical or learning disabilities, and other vulnerable groups are especially at risk of experiencing poor mental health whilst in prison. Depression was the most prevalent mental health condition reported by inmates, followed by mania, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Mental health conditions were reported more frequently among prisoners in state institutions. We would like to reiterate Ms. Fair's question, why has no one questioned the \$17million spent which held 50 people and 'required' over 200 people to supervise them given that these inmates spent 20-24 hours per day in lockdown?

Over the last few decades, many of the mental institutions in the United States were emptied out and closed down. And that did not happen because everyone in these institutions had been treated and safely sent on their way. No, these institutions have been shut down without a clear solution for how people would be cared for moving forward. Why is this relevant to the criminal justice system? It's relevant because these hospitals were shut down, but there was nothing else created to replace them. Plus, there still is not adequate healthcare in the United States, so people without health insurance and money are unable to get the care and treatment that they need. Many of these people end up homeless and some end up in facilities such as Northern Correctional.

Currently, the United States has incarcerated 2.2 million people, nearly half of whom are non-violent drug offenders, accused people held pre-trial because they cannot afford their bail, and others who have been arrested for failure to pay debts or fines for minor infractions. Poverty and excessive legal punishments contribute significantly to the United States' high rate of imprisonment, which has disproportionately affected low-income and Black and Brown populations. In Connecticut, correctional positions increased from 1557 in 1969 to over 7000 in 2002. Where is the equity? Where are the mental wellness services? Why are such white supremacist institutions so easily funded, protected and supported in Connecticut? Without reducing poverty—and more specifically, income inequality—as well as racial bias and rolling back harsh sentences for certain crimes, Connecticut will not meaningfully reduce its prison population and will continue to squander its budget on institutionalized racism, inequity, and structural racism, the main ingredients of white supremacy.

Black and Brown United In Action recognizes racism as a public health crisis and also acknowledges the ignorance to the real need to support and empower Black and Brown people has facilitated healthcare inequity, over policing and the ongoing criminalization of poor Black and Brown people. We ask your committee to reduce spending on correctional oversight and make the Department of Corrections become more financially responsible and shift funds to matters which involve equity, empowerment and true democracy and development of Black and Brown people such as increasing the budget to the Department of Labor to include unemployment benefits which can actually meet the cost of living in Connecticut as well as undocumented workers who have lost assignments from working in documented household.

Sincerely,

Black and Brown United in Action