

Appropriations Committee

Friday, February 26

**House Bill 6439: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR**

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Mincey, Representative France, and members of the Appropriations:

With the emphasis on public safety being the mission of this agency, we also share the responsibility of providing quality treatment and programming with the goal of assisting the offender in correcting the behaviors that ultimately led to the incarceration. This duty is challenging enough under conventional circumstances; however, this global pandemic has brought to light the importance of these services, and how it may be a matter of life and death for some of the inmates under our jurisdiction.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic started, over 4,000 offenders have been released from incarceration. Many inmates were released much earlier than expected, and were not given the opportunity to engage in the needed programming that would lead to a successful community reintegration. This continues to be evident by the large number of offenders who have issues with substance abuse, domestic violence, and/or homelessness.

With society already in the grips of Covid-19, many of the treatment providers statewide had closed due to the federal and state COVID regulations. During the first wave of early releases, many inmates never had a chance to complete the addiction programming recommended for them during assessments and reviews. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Connecticut already had an ongoing opioid epidemic, which had continued to grow under the pandemic, as many services are stretched thin or have become non-existent. Community in person fellowship programs, like Alcoholic and Narcotic Anonymous meetings, had been suspended or went online. We must keep in mind that not everyone has access to a computer or internet service.

The numbers of overdose deaths continue to rise almost daily from the offenders released early. Many inmates were scheduled to be or were already engaged in substance abuse treatment at the time of release with the agency's programs. Discharge planning became extremely challenging as halfway houses, residential programs, and homeless shelters had to close or limit the number of capacity for residents, due to CDC guidelines. Various DOC contracted providers were not able to meet with the offenders in order to complete the needed paperwork for housing and basic needs programs, because of the sudden releases. Programming and treatment staff assisted with positive outcomes. Whether it was setting up last minute phone screenings for housing, making appointments to be seen for medical and mental health post release, or identifying offenders with opioid use histories and then providing training of the use of NARCAN provided for them at discharge if deemed necessary, treatment staff sought positive outcomes despite these challenges.

We continue the work, even when it requires us to be in harm's way. Not the daily threats that are normally associated with working in a prison environment, but a deadly disease that at times has crippled our facilities. As correctional facility supervisors, working from home is not an option. Our presence is essential no matter the risk. We establish operational plans and procedures around the COVID-19 threat, and oversee the implementation in order to ensure a safe and secure environment for all staff and offenders. During this unprecedented time where guidelines and direction were continuously evolving and changing, adjustments had to be made in almost real time in order to prevent mass outbreaks.

Agency supervisors were being tested like never before. Many themselves unfortunately also became sick with Covid-19, but returned to duty as soon as the mandatory quarantine period ended. Many of us had to look our loved ones in the eyes and explain why we had to continue to expose ourselves, as concerns grew from the community. Prison conditions became a spotlighted COVID topic on the national news. Some staff requested to sleep in the provided hotel rooms, filled with the fear of bringing the virus home to their elderly parents, spouses, and children.

We are not living under "normal" times, and our approach to this pandemic must also not be normal. We must take all of this into consideration when negotiating contracts. The general public may not see the heroes walking into the buildings or what we do behind with the barbed wire, but they rest assured knowing that we remain ever vigilant.

Respectfully submitted,

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