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Leighton Johnson

Stop Solitary CT

Testify

Good evening Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France, and members of the Appropriations Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you tonight. My name is Leighton Johnson and I am a resident of New Haven CT, and I am the Public Education Coordinator and a steering committee member of Stop Solitary CT. I am testifying in regards to proposed reallocation of the money saved from the closure of Northern CI..

In the Governors' recent 2021 budget address he stated: "We've learned that quiet isn't always peace, and the norms and notions of what is "just" isn't always justice." He referred to America as: "The land of steady habits". Well, I believe that CT in general, and CT DOC in particular, need to have a steady habit of treating people humanely.

The Governor's Budget should include funds earmarked for programs that help people instead of harming them. I also believe that the fact that the governor chose to only reduce the cost of prison phone calls by four cents was a slap in the face and in the pocketbooks and wallets of families of incarcerated. The 13 million or so saved by the closure of Northern should be spent on imparting some savings to families of incarcerated individuals. That burden is heavy on the families and has an adverse effect on the mental health and behavior of individuals who are incarcerated.

The Governor's Budget should have also included a series of cost savings measures, which include: reducing possession of a controlled substance from a felony to a misdemeanor for crime category classifications of five or less; eliminating inflationary growth within the agency and increasing community corrections grants. The goal should be providing opportunities for positive change, and by effectively using the time individuals are in custody, DOC can increase their chances of a successful transition back to the community.

That is why the PROTECT act should be passed.

In the PROTECT act, we have drafted language stating that the Ombudsman should be brought back to corrections. The creation of the corrections ombudsman position will provide a Correction Accountability Commission who will not only select, but also advise the Ombudsman. External oversight and accountability will not only help to have an entity that is unbiased in its role and in its duties to give some redress to grievances, but it will also save the state probably hundreds of thousands if not millions in lawsuits, from individuals who felt this was the only way they could get some relief for the issues unaddressed. Instead of spending unnecessary money on an inspector general, who is not unbiased in most cases when it comes to DOC, the funds can be better allocated here.

Further ways to utilize the savings would be to reallocate funds to:

Community Corrections

Community Corrections agencies are supposed to provide correctional programs such as alcohol/drug treatment, sex offender treatment, employment counseling and referrals, as well as mental health services in order to promote long-term behavior change. Research has demonstrated that treatment

combined with supervision has the greatest impact on reducing criminal activity, compared to any other criminal justice system sanction. I strongly believe that funds saved should be allocated to diversion programs coupled with re-entry and rehabilitative programs in the community as alternatives to incarceration. I also believe that the money saved should be spent on a Specialty Court Grant Program. Specialty courts are effective in handling particular types of cases, such as drug cases.

Health Services

The health division is supposed to maintain a team of professionals that includes physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, registered nurses, dentists, psychiatrists, mental health specialists, pharmacists, as well as other licensed professionals.

From my experience and from the reports from people who are still currently incarcerated, health services are inadequate and there is even a lack of certain specialists who can perform procedures and or treatment at a higher quality than the staff they have at hand. That in return leads to deteriorating health conditions and other harm that could otherwise be prevented or treated.

Women who are pregnant are still put in solitary. Recently we saw in the news a lawsuit where a lady had her baby in the toilet. There is a profound lack of quality medical care in the DOC. In past years there have also been suicides in both the men and women facilities due to lack of adequate medical and mental health care.

Re-entry

Re-entry services is supposed to be responsible for carrying out the Department's mission to reduce the risk of future criminal conduct. The funds saved should be used to enhance linkages to community-based networks of support. These should include but not be limited to: Inmate and community advocacy, transition programs, and release planning, alcohol and drug treatment, parenting, education, apprenticeship and work/vocational skills. Mental health, medical treatment, housing assistance, and reentry services will aid in a successful reentry.

The goal of corrections should be to correct not punish or further harm. The goal of Parole and Probation should be to insure that people are able to get the assistance and services that they need in order to continue being in the free world and contributing members of society.

Thank you,

Leighton Johnson

Public Education Coordinator

SSCT