



Legislative Testimony
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Written Testimony Supporting Senate Bill 1543, An Act Concerning the Department of Correction, Senate Bill 1541, An Act Concerning the Office of the Correction Ombuds, Use of Force, and Body Cameras in Correctional Facilities, Claims Against the State by Persons Who Are Incarcerated, and House Bill 7133, An Act Concerning Parole Eligibility

Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, Ranking Members Kissel and Fishbein, and members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Jess Zaccagnino, and I am the policy counsel of the American Civil Liberties Union of Connecticut (ACLU-CT). I am writing to testify in support of Senate Bill 1543, An Act Concerning the Department of Correction, Senate Bill 1541, An Act Concerning the Office of the Correction Ombuds, Use of Force, and Body Cameras in Correctional Facilities, Claims Against the State by Persons Who Are Incarcerated, and House Bill 7133, An Act Concerning Parole Eligibility.

The ACLU-CT is an organization dedicated to ending mass incarceration, eliminating racial disparities in the criminal legal system, and reducing harms to justice-impacted people. People who are incarcerated in Connecticut's jails and prisons deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. The ACLU-CT strongly supports legislation that works to reduce the role and scope of incarceration in society and ensure accountability and oversight when it comes to Connecticut prisons and jails. For that reason, we support Senate Bill 1541, Senate Bill 1543, and House Bill 7133.

Senate Bill 1541, An Act Concerning the Office of the Correction Ombuds

The ACLU-CT strongly supported legislation that created an ombuds for the Department of Corrections. This bill would work to improve our DOC Ombuds position, improving accountability and oversight in our corrections system. The bill

would extend the term of the Correction Ombuds from two to four years. This improves continuity and better aligns with the terms of many other ombuds across states: New Jersey's ombuds serves five-year terms while the Maryland ombuds serves six-year terms. The bill also codifies existing practices between the DOC and the Correction Ombuds and guarantees access to correctional facilities, confidential and cost-free communication with people who are incarcerated, and allowing unannounced visits, even in emergencies or lockdowns. The Office of the Correction Ombuds' independence is also safeguarded by protecting its budget from executive reductions and allowing direct submission of appropriations requests. The bill requires that correctional officers are held to the same standards that local and state police are held to and requires that collective bargaining agreements cannot prevent the right of the public to access misconduct investigations or disciplinary records. The bill, among many other reforms, imposes penalties for the failure to report, protects whistleblowers, and requires DOC to develop a plan for the implementation of body-worn cameras in correctional facilities.

Senate Bill 1543, An Act Concerning the Department of Correction

Senate Bill 1543 requires the assessment and provision of mental health services upon intake to DOC, access to "productive programming" for employment, education, and vocational training, "palatable and nutritious meals," efficiency in permitting a person who is incarcerated to authorize another person to access their medical records, information publicly about malpractice and neglect claims against DOC and the process of filing claims, the information that is given to the next of kin, and a database of cases which the Attorney General's office defended against. The bill would require the DOC to buy at least two body scanners, one for York Correctional Institution and one at Manson Youth Institution in Cheshire.

House Bill 7133, An Act Concerning Parole Eligibility

Among the more cruel and unjust aspects of the system of mass incarceration is the criminalization of children and young people. Connecticut has recognized that the

criminal legal system should hold people under eighteen less culpable for their choices, seen in past legislation that creates shorter parole opportunities for young people who received lengthy sentences for crimes committed when they were under eighteen. That previous legislation was a good step, but there is further to go. Science clearly indicates that eighteen is not a magic dividing line between young people and adults. If Public Act 15-84 gave earlier parole opportunities because they are less culpable than adults in the criminal legal system—as the legislative history indicates—then it only makes sense to follow that judgment to its true conclusion. That conclusion means that people who were convicted of crimes committed when they were under age twenty-one should receive the same earlier parole opportunities as other younger people, in recognition of the fact that leaving adolescence happens on a spectrum.

Making this change is also important for racial justice. Black and Latine young people are incarcerated at rates disproportionate to their overall proportion of Connecticut's population. These disparities are worse for young people. Thus, if people who were convicted for offenses committed when they were under twenty-one are given parole opportunities, this will have an outsized benefit for Black and Latine people in Connecticut's prisons. This is thus an important step toward eliminating racial disparities in incarceration. Finally, this bill aligns with the values of Connecticut residents. People in this state believe in second chances and know that people who can get the right kind of help can turn their lives around. This bill gives opportunities to people who have done just that—moved towards rehabilitation and reinvention while incarcerated, despite many obstacles. Providing people convicted when they were younger with opportunities for parole reflects Connecticut residents' firm belief in redemption.