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Testimony before the Judiciary Committee: Criminal Justice Reform

Presented by: Julia Wilcox, Policy Specialist, Connecticut Association of Nonprofits (CT Nonprofits)

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Good afternoon, Senator McDonald, Representative Lawlor and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee. My name is Julia Wilcox, and I am a Policy Specialist for the Connecticut Association of Nonprofits. CT Nonprofits is a membership association of over 500 nonprofit organizations. Approximately 300 of our member agencies contract with the State of Connecticut for a variety of health and human services. This afternoon, I am proud to represent the member agencies of the Community Justice Division of the Association.

Nonprofit Community Justice Providers afford the State of Connecticut with a broad scope of extremely high quality services, at an ongoing, cost-savings to the state. With relation specifically to the Criminal Justice System, programs include both residential and nonresidential services, Alternatives to Incarceration, Halfway House Programs, Substance Abuse and Behavioral Health Treatment Programs, assistance in the areas of Domestic Violence, adult education and vocation – to name just a few. In addition, and of critical importance, programs also exist to provide assistance to the children and families of individuals involved in this complicated cycle – including victims of crime. Our member agencies create opportunities for positive change by promoting and supporting the full potential of individuals, the strength of families, and the well being of the communities of Connecticut.

We commend members of the Judiciary Committee on your diligence and commitment to examination of the Criminal Justice System of the State. These are extremely challenging times for those involved in the provision of Community Justice Services. However, along with these challenges, come many opportunities for positive changes for the individuals, families and communities who will be impacted by the impending revisions to the statewide system. Any situation that provides a closer study and in turn, underscores the significance of the Re-entry system of services is a positive move toward a better world for those involved in this complicated process.

The fifteen Proposals presented for consideration this afternoon, certainly illustrate the ongoing commitment and expertise of the Judiciary Committee, and your considerable efforts are tremendously appreciated by all. I join you this afternoon to provide overarching commentary, on behalf of the nonprofit Community Justice network – as opposed to recommendations specific to each proposal.

We would concur with the views of many here today, as expressed by Representative Lawlor: "The most important part of these proposals is improving access to information about the people in our criminal justice system." (11/24/2007, Journal Inquirer)

The Community Justice Providers of CT Nonprofits respectfully request your consideration of the following areas of concern, moving forward:

1. Coordinate efforts to assure the inclusion of the perspective, input and expertise of the Nonprofit, Community Justice Provider Network. This is particularly critical, in relation to the prevention of any unintended consequences moving forward.
2. Continue efforts to assure the stability of the nonprofit provider network, as we partner with the State to address the critical issues at hand, and develop a strengthened system of services and supports. As each proposal is reviewed, we ask that the
3. With all due respect to victims of crime in attendance - develop ways to educate the public, and address the misconceptions of the general population, with regard to Public Safety as it relates to the Criminal Justice System. Develop an understanding of the demonstrated/verified correlation between provision of intensive, quality community supervision, (effective reentry strategies) and an overarching reduction in recidivism. In the words of Representative Dyson: "The tug-of-war between rehabilitation and punishment isn't going to be easy." It is essential that we assist the communities of Connecticut to understand this very difficult balance, and to understand that an approach that supports Community Supervision is not 'soft on crime,' but an effective and essential part of a successful solution.
4. Increase communication and information sharing among all stakeholders – and assure the support necessary to implement such systems moving forward. Certainly, DOC and CSSD are focused in this area as well.
5. Finally – In an effort to build upon the efforts of the Governor's Sentencing and Parole Review Taskforce, and the multitude of additional Committees and subcommittees dedicated to this area - Explore the development of a Statewide Commission on Reentry – to include all stakeholders, with the capacity to make recommendations, link agencies within and across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors and implement change.

The recent development of the many state-wide committees, sub-committees and research related projects, have certainly yielded numerous opportunities to discuss evidence based reports related to the significant impact of the community- based services provided by the nonprofit network. We are encouraged by the testimony presented yesterday by Governor Rell and many state officials (Public Hearing 11/26: Governor's Sentencing and Parole Review Taskforce) which support the position of the Nonprofit Provider network, in favor of intensive, community-based supervision as "... the safest way to return offenders to the community."

Within my written testimony, I have provided links to several of the many reports which you have no doubt reviewed in this process. From the Criminal Justice Policy & Planning Division of the Office of Policy Management (OPM) & the Connecticut Statistical Analysis Center, to the Department of Correction (DOC) to the Court Support Services Division (CSSD) – there are overriding trends and statistics that speak to the critical connection between the provision of intensive, quality community supervision, and an overarching reduction in recidivism.

Individuals with far greater expertise than I have presented these findings – from both a statewide and national perspective. Much worthwhile information has been reported in numerous areas for your consideration. While the Office of Fiscal Analysis (OFA) and others have provided critically important information related to the 'Fiscal Impact of Eliminating Parole and Transitional Supervision' (9/08/07), there is an additional impact in very 'human' terms, that must be included in the equation.

First: There are any number of unintended consequences to some of the changes that have recently occurred – and those under consideration. Processes that may at once appear to be a ‘privilege’ that may simply be revoked, may, in fact, provide an extremely critical tool in the development of an incentive - based system, where consequences and accountability are a primary focus.

Second: Beyond the expectations surrounding the ex-offender, it is necessary for there to be an equally supported expectation for the welfare of the families of those involved - both the victims, and innocent family members. The needs of these children and families in crisis, must be addressed, with focus placed upon the stability of the family unit, and to promoting positive change.

To this end, it is critical for the Communities of Connecticut to understand that supervised reentry into their communities – and NOT a system of extended incarceration, is critical to increasing public safety, by ending the cycle of recidivism and strengthening and healing of these families in crisis.

In closing, I would encourage you to utilize the capacity and the willingness of the Private Provider network, and to contact providers within your local communities. I would be pleased to schedule these tours, or to assist in any way moving forward. The ability of the state of CT to adequately meet the needs of its residents is greatly dependent upon the ability of the Private Provider Community to sustain a vibrant network, which will continue to serve as the ultimate safety net for Connecticut’s citizens at risk.

I thank you for your time and consideration of these critically important issues. I would be pleased to answer any questions at this time.

*For additional information,
Please do not hesitate to contact Julia Wilcox, Policy Specialist, CT Nonprofits:
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Related Information of Interest:

- ✧ For information related to Private Provider Programs available within your community:
Directory of Contracted Community Programs: Connecticut Department of Correction - Parole and Community Services, Theresa C. Lantz, Commissioner, Randy Braren, Director of Parole and Community Services, Lawrence P. Mayer, Director of Programs and Services (June 2007)
<http://www.ct.gov/doc/lib/doc/pdf/contractedcommprogdirectory.pdf>
- ✧ Recidivism Study: Annual Report: State of Connecticut, Office of Policy & Management, Criminal Justice Policy and Planning Division, Connecticut Statistical Analysis Center, Central Connecticut State University (March 1, 2007)
<http://www.ct.gov/opm/LIB/opm/CJPPD/CjResearch/RecidivismStudy/RecidivismStudy2007.pdf>
- ✧ A Study of Reconviction Rates of Discharged Inmates from the Connecticut Department of Correction, Stephen M. Cox, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Central Connecticut State University (April 2006)
<http://www.ct.gov/opm/LIB/opm/CJPPD/CjResearch/RecidivismStudy/RecidivismStudy2006.pdf>
- ✧ ‘Connecticut Department of Correction 2006 Annual Report:
<http://www.ct.gov/doc/lib/doc/PDF/PDFReport/annualreport2006.pdf>