

**Testimony before the Judiciary Committee of the Connecticut State Legislature  
November 27, 2007**

My name is Jamie Bissonette and I direct the Criminal Justice Program at the American Friends Service Committee in the New England Region. I have 30 years experience in the field of Criminal Justice having focused on work with crime victims, the families of homicide victims and those who are imprisoned. I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Most of the bills we are looking at today represent a good faith effort to make sure that convicted felons who have a history of predatory violence do not have the opportunity to do more harm. The remedies that have been presented for public commentary are complex and deserve our careful consideration. Rather than respond to each bill, I have decided to give my general impressions of the proposed legislation.

**Parole** is incorrectly coupled with “early release.” Parole is a vital public safety tool. If prisoners “max” their sentence because they are denied the option of parole, they simply return to their communities without housing, job or treatment plans. Their transition is self-directed and invariably produces chaos in their families and communities. All too often, this chaos results in tragedy. The result: over 60% of released prisoners are returned to custody. It is crucial that a thorough assessment of the parole department is undertaken and that policies and procedures are put in place for reliable evaluations and substantial support so that the men and women who are released from the Department of Corrections can make good transitions and become stable members of their communities. These policies and procedures would render a **public registry** of parolees unnecessary. There is reference to **re-entry support** in one of the bills but the monies apportioned are not sufficient.

**The Department of Corrections** needs to place a priority on rehabilitation. It is not enough to incapacitate an individual; each prisoner has to have a real opportunity to turn their lives around. There are provisions in one of the proposed pieces of legislation to move non-violent offenders into alternative settings, and this should be done. But this action will not resolve the rehabilitative needs of those who are in prison for violent crime. Most of these individuals will return to their families and their communities. It is important that each prisoner is making concrete steps toward resolving the problems that resulted in their crimes. A thorough assessment of the current rehabilitative programs within the DoC must be undertaken and resources assigned to assure that prisoners who have been convicted of violent crime address their issues before they are released. Yes, this will be costly, but we have been shown how costly it truly is if the needs of these men and women are ignored.

**Three strikes laws** have been proven to be a disaster in states where they have been implemented. Here, three strikes have been combined with penalty enhancements that will dramatically increase the number of people who will spend their entire lives in

prison. The cost of implementing these laws will take resources away from crucial public health and public safety projects in the community.

**True prevention** is not mentioned in any of the recommended legislation. Prevention is a solution, not a remedy. It is vitally important that a significant amount of public safety resources be assigned to prevention work.

None of the legislation apportions more resources to support the healing of **victims of violent crime**. As crime victims, our needs are complex and scarcely recognized by the criminal justice system. It is important that victims have a real opportunity to enter into a healing process and it is crucial that families of homicide victims have the means to bury and remember their loved ones with dignity. I work with families who have lost loved ones to homicide and know that the way we respond to victims of crime determines the health, balance and eventual peace in our communities.

In closing I would ask the Judiciary Committee to put resources toward prevention of crime, the support of crime victims, and both the rehabilitation of convicts and strong support after their release. Sadly, none of the proposed legislation we are considering today accomplishes this.