

TESTIMONY – Judiciary Committee – November 27, 2007

Residents of New Haven are no different from residents of Cheshire. Everyone wants to be safe in his or her home, and we all want to prevent violence in our communities.

What is the right response to murders and other acts of violence, whether they occur in the suburbs or in the cities? A longer sentence—after the crime has already happened—is not the answer. And a 3-strikes law means that we have allowed THREE crimes to happen. Resources should be directed toward stopping violent crimes BEFORE they happen. That means more programs in every community for drug treatment, mental health treatment, psychological services for troubled youth, family counseling, and in the urban areas particularly, it means better education and activities for youth, mentoring, good jobs and affordable housing, and especially for people coming out of prison. It means preventing illegal guns from being sold on our streets. Don't spend more money on locking people up—it doesn't solve the problem of violence. We need a real public safety response.

Commissioner Lantz has spoken on many occasions about the value of releasing people from prison under supervision, rather than having them max out on their sentences. Banning parole is counterproductive. It needs to end NOW. And bringing people back from the community who were already out on parole and doing well—this is completely unfair, if not illegal. I had never heard that Parole was not doing an adequate job of evaluating the prisoners that come before the Board. But if you think they need to look again at some individuals' paperwork, fine—but it's on paper, so it shouldn't be necessary to bring anyone back to prison, causing them to lose a job and sever the ties they had been renewing with family, especially children. If Community Enforcement was not doing a good enough job or didn't have enough staff to properly monitor the parolees, then fix it—but not at the expense of persons who had already been granted parole.

And what happens after someone's sentence is completely finished? He might still be a violent person, but now you have no jurisdiction. The Cheshire murderers, had they not sought parole, would have finished their sentences a short time later, and might have done the same horrible crime. So the real question should be: ARE PEOPLE BEING REHABILITATED IN PRISON OR NOT? Instead of looking at building two new prisons, legislators should look at what kind of rehabilitation is occurring behind those walls. Given the number of people filling our prisons (including many who don't need to be in a prison setting) I don't believe DOC is able to provide proper rehabilitation. I want to know how many people are on waiting lists for programs, how many individuals who need drug treatment are not getting it, if everyone who needs an Alternatives to Violence program is in one, if education beyond a GED is available, and if the conditions in prison help or hinder the reintegration of prisoners back into to our communities. This is a public safety issue. We will be safer when real rehabilitation takes place. Last session our organization in New Haven, People Against Injustice, proposed a citizen/legislator Commission that would have looked together at public safety issues such as these. Former prisoners, family members of prisoners and community leaders would help legislators determine what is needed.

This legislative bill calls for an Online Listing of Parolees and Probationers that would provide a description of those offenders, including their addresses and conviction information. Not only does this suggest that you don't believe any rehabilitation has taken place in the prison system, but it would increase the already very difficult problem of securing a job after imprisonment. Successful employment of former prisoners definitely makes us all safer, so please do not make reentry more difficult.

The provisions in the bill that provide for better information-sharing, increased mental health treatment, review of sentences of non-violent offenders in order to divert those who qualify to community programs, and expansion of re-entry services—these are good ideas, which should be funded. If it is possible to identify “potentially” violent individuals, the result should be to provide extensive therapy, as this would enhance public safety.

We will be safer when money is spent in our communities on services that prevent crimes from happening. Don't spend our money on more and longer sentences AFTER the crimes have already occurred. And don't build new prisons.

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