

Dear Judiciary Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written comment and for this critically important listening session. I'd like to begin by sharing the following poem excerpt, from former CT resident and writer, Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles:

"Dignity is the infinite worth of a life.
It does not have to be earned. It is a birthright.
Respect can be measured. It might increase or worsen.
But dignity is inherent to being a person...

Restore dignity to those who have had it stolen away
By acknowledging and listening to what they have to say.
Suspend judgment and defensiveness and be still in their place,
With empathy, curiosity, openness and grace. "

-Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles, excerpted from poem "The Killing of George Floyd and the Death of Dignity"

As a CT public educator and lifetime resident, I implore you to support LCO #3471: An Act Concerning Police Accountability in its entirety. As a classroom teacher of young children, I recite the Pledge of Allegiance with my class each school day. Reciting the words "with liberty and justice for all" creates a catch in my throat and always gives me pause. LCO #3471: An Act Concerning Police Accountability has the potential to begin to rebuild some of the public trust that has been eroded in the notion of "liberty and justice for all." We have yet to breathe life into that declaration as a country, to allow for that sentiment to be anything more than elusive for BIPOC. This act begins to combat the systemic racism that too often imbues policing, and is a necessary step in a more global approach to dismantling inequity and inequality that exists across systems in our state.

There is compelling evidence that Connecticut, like the rest of the country, suffers from the same racial injustice across policing and criminal justice, housing, education, work places, economic opportunities, health outcomes, etc. Of course, this is why you are hosting this listening session today, and for that I am so grateful. The good work completed in drafting LCO #3471 is absolutely to be commended and I am proud to live in a state that is coming together to enact necessary change. LCO #3471 needs to be supported because it is an important step towards equity and equality. If I may, I would suggest that the act does not even go far *enough*. It does not explicitly mandate employing nonlethal community safety personnel in response to nonviolent calls, for example, though calls for its consideration (§ 18). Interrupting the use of school resource officers to perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline is also imperative, and not yet evident in this proposed legislation. Mandating high-quality training in implicit bias is important, but so is critically examining and perhaps reinventing the cultural competency, sensitivity, and bias-free training that is already in place, because there are clearly glaring issues that remain even though some of these trainings are included already. We are absolutely called

upon to do this as educators in CT. Our fellow public servants, police officers, must do this work, too. As humans, we must all commit to this work. Including training and education in the areas of anti-racism, systemic racism, and education that guarantees a comprehensive understanding of the very inequities and injustices that have plagued policing throughout history would be important, so we can continue to do better. Here, I have named just a few of the ways in which the proposed legislation, LCO #3471, has begun to take on the necessary work, but there is much more work still to do. Dr. Ibram X. Kendi has said that policies have the power to determine the success of groups. Our policies have to be actively anti-racist. Still, to support LCO #3471 is to commit to a trajectory of doing right by Connecticut.

As a nation and as a state, we have left communities of color in fear of the very people who are hired to protect them for all too long. In your position, you have the tremendous responsibility, honor, and power to dignify and humanize our state's citizenry. As a white person, I recognize that all of humanity's freedom is inextricably tied to those who remain oppressed. We cannot afford, to operate from any worldview other than this, especially you--decisionmakers. And so, in the words of Lilla Watson, "if you have come because your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us work together."

We cannot, cannot, cannot continue to live in a world where dignity is stolen away. Please support LCO #3471: An Act Concerning Police Accountability. It is incumbent upon you to protect our Connecticut BIPOC.

Respectfully submitted,
Dr. Erin M. Birden
Southbury, CT