

*Written Testimony Regarding LCO No. 3471, An Act Concerning Police Accountability*

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

My name is Justine Lee Hirten, I am a resident of Fairfield, Connecticut. I am testifying regarding LCO No. 3471, An Act Concerning Police Accountability. I support the current movement to enact police reform and I believe this bill is an appropriate and necessary response to the injustices we have seen across this country. Police violence exists in Connecticut and we must take swift action to reshape policy in this state in a commitment to building a more equitable future. The provisions of this bill represent an important step forward, but I have comments on some sections.

Sections 1-4 & 15 include changes to strengthen the certification and de-certification process, but retaining POST's authority over that process is problematic as POST is a majority law-enforcement body. This maintains that police have the authority to police themselves in the certification and de-certification process rather than granting that regulatory power to an independent party with no conflict of interest. It seems unreasonable to expect that effective police accountability will take place within this arrangement.

In Section 18 the current language has the police departments determine whether social workers should or should not be used for certain policing work. Leaving this up to police departments may not be an effective solution as the priorities within the department may interfere with making appropriate, objective assessments of the need for social workers to replace them in certain aspects of their work. An independent body would be better suited for making these kinds of evaluations, and social workers should remain separate and not embedded within the police department.

Section 16 describes new mental health assessment requirements. Every five years seems extremely infrequent given the demanding nature of police work and the complexity of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This low frequency seems to trivialize the issues of mental health instead of attempting to address them, and there is no incentive to opt into more frequent assessments even though it would benefit officers to have mental health support. It also seems unclear what consequences will exist for departments that fail to provide mental health assessments. This section of the bill needs to be developed further and have a greatly increased frequency of assessments, it must give more gravity to the severity of PTSD and to the negative effects police work has on mental and emotional well-being.

I support Sections 40 and 41 and believe these are strong parts of this bill and should not be weakened in revisions. Sections 8 and 9 are good steps forward for improving transparency. Sections 21 and 22 are important provisions that will help decrease discriminatory searches based on biased "suspicion" rather than probable cause. I am in favor of these provisions.

I support Section 17 and believe that the power to subpoena and compel witnesses and document must be granted to these review boards absolutely in order for them to have meaningful impact; granting and protecting power for civilian review is important to making their presence more than a symbolic gesture.

Section 30 creates the duty to intervene for police who witness wrongful use of force. This should be more comprehensive and extend beyond wrongful use of force to cover a wider

range of illegal police actions, including illegal searches, in order to push forward deeper changes in police culture and interactions.

Ending police violence and racism in policing is a holistic and pervasive issue that will always require a multi-faceted approach. Meaningful changes will be difficult as we are pulling at threads in a complex interconnected web — we cannot be shortsighted at this time, we have to see through the difficulties of these adjustments and build up long-term supports to carry our communities through to a safer future. This vision includes divestment from policing and reinvestment into programs and aid that support our communities through education, health care, mental health services, social workers, and affordable housing in this state. This bill is a crucial step forward in support of that vision, and it will be even stronger with suggested amendments. I hope to see it supported by lawmakers.