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Senator Winfield, Representative Stafstrom, and to all members of the Judiciary committee, I want to thank you for taking the time to address this special moment in history. The work put forth in drafting this bill and calling forward a special session is no small undertaking, and the community sees and values this effort.

Before I begin I must stress that my opinions are my own and DO NOT reflect the opinions of my employer.

I’m writing specifically in regards to;

§§ 3 & 15-16 — MENTAL HEALTH ASSESSMENTS FOR POLICE OFFICERS

§ 18 — EVALUATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS RESPONDING TO CERTAIN POLICE CALLS

§§ 19 & 20 — BODY CAMERAS, DASHBOARD CAMERAS, AND RELATED GRANTS

§§ 3 & 15-16 - Periodic mental health assessments for police officers is a much needed intervention to address the mental health needs of human beings who are tasked with facing the most difficult situations in society. The duty of a police officer is no small task. In one shift, an officer may be asked to respond to a fatal car accident, then respond to a noise complaint, and then a domestic violence call. For many of us, the day we call 911 is likely a traumatic one - police aren’t called when we have our best days. That being said, tasking police officers with addressing traumatic incidents on a daily basis with no ongoing mental health support is irresponsible.

Last session, “SB-824 An Act Concerning Mental Health Care and Wellness Training and Suicide Prevention for Police Officers.” was written which began to address this oft overlooked issue. This bill initially included language which mandated that upon any use of deadly force, a police officer must surrender their service weapon and submit to a mental health assessment by a licensed professional before being authorized to return to work. The bill as it was written seemed to enjoy broad support in committee

before being moved forward for a vote. Any incident where a person “fears for their life” is a traumatic incident. If a person experiences this on a regular basis due to their occupation, this puts them at higher risk for post-traumatic stress disorder.

It’s also important that this bill increase the periodic assessments from once every five years to quarterly – once every three months. A mental health assessment once every five years with several layers of police driven oversight and scrutiny is so weak it could be considered useless. The amount of human trauma a police officer witnesses on a regular basis is so frequent, these screenings must be done once every three months. Normalizing engagement with mental health treatment will have a pandora’s box effect on the wellness of police officers and their families. It will also open doors to more routine engagement with mental health treatment as well as shifting officer’s perspectives on the role mental health treatment can play in community safety and public health.

In regards to police officers and mental health, if the State Legislature truly seeks to put a good faith effort in addressing police officer’s mental health needs, these components must be amended, strengthened, and evidenced based.

§ 18 - While this section of the law is earnest in its intentions, embedding social workers within police departments would tie them to the same internal forces which make police officers less than likely to speak up when they see others commit acts of misconduct. It is the “fraternal” nature of police departments which leads to officer’s “covering” for each other and so long as social workers and police officers share the same office, this dynamic will extend to the social worker. Workplace bullying and harassment would lead to high turnover rates of social workers who speak out on misconduct and inappropriate treatment of citizens.

A more effective and responsive approach would be to expand capacity and funding for mental health services, affordable housing, and the other things the community is demanding. Year after year, legislature continues to cut funding to mental health grants and programs to address budgetary shortfalls. In reality, the community based programs currently working on thin budgets go great lengths in reducing the likelihood that people living with mental illness will come in contact with the criminal “justice” system. When we say “defund the police” we also mean “invest in community.”

Its important that social workers do not become another “tool” in the current system of policing which has a permanent and irreversible negative perception to many people in the Black and Brown community. Embedding social workers within police departments will do damage to the relationship between the community and the profession of social work.

I cannot stress this enough.

DO NOT EMBED SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE POLICE DEPARTMENT.

DEFUND THE POLICE.

DEFUND PRISONS AND INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEMS.

INVEST IN COMMUNITY DRIVEN, COMMUNITY LEAD, MUTUAL AID SUPPORTS.

§§ 19 & 20 -The use of body cams, dash cams, and other camera based surveillance equipment is crucial in building systems of transparency, surveillance, and accountability with any system of government which has authority and custody over human beings. This is not limited to police and body cams. Local jails, like the one in the Stamford Police Department, need body cams too. The Department of Corrections needs to implement monitoring cameras. The Department of Developmental Services needs to implement surveillance cameras. The Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services needs to implement surveillance cameras statewide in all of their inpatient units - beyond Whiting Forensics and Connecticut Valley Hospital.

Speaking from personal experience as a person who worked in a forensic institutional setting under 24/7 surveillance via security cameras, I can directly testify as to their efficacy in changing behavior, improving accountability, and reducing incidents of physical force. All facilities at Whiting Forensic Hospital were put under legislative mandate to have security cameras in all patient care areas which would be monitored by staff, administration, as well as an INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATIVE BODY. This mix of internal and external oversight meant that no incident of physical restraint went unaddressed by administration. The increased scrutiny also had a transformative psychological effect on direct care staff. This lead to a reduction in the use of force. What cameras don't show is the instances where staff chose a different path than physical force because they knew they were being watched.

It's important that legislators listen to the community.

The community wants the police defunded.

The community wants the community funded.

We must shift away from this outdated and racist institution.

The arch of history is long, but it bends towards justice.

These "reforms" bring us closer to justice, but we also want

DEFUNDING

DEFUND THE POLICE