

Greetings Members of the Judiciary Committee, chairs Winfield and Stasfstrom, ranking members Kissel and Rebimbas, thank you for this opportunity to speak in support of LCO 3471 “An Act Concerning Police Accountability.”

I am the Rev. Josh Pawelek, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Society: East in Manchester, a leader with Moral Monday CT, and a resident of Glastonbury.

I wish to offer my sincere gratitude to those who drafted this bill. In the midst of a national reckoning with our country’s white supremacist history and its ongoing legacy of racism, especially as it pertains to policing, and in the midst of a global pandemic, you have crafted legislation that will begin to reduce the worst—and deadliest—manifestations of racism in policing. Thank you for your dedication to making right what has been wrong, not with police but with *policing*, for far too long.

On April 2nd, a young, unarmed, Puerto Rican man named Jose “Jay” Soto was murdered by police in Manchester. I’ve had the privilege of getting to know some of Jay’s family members and offering them what support I can as a local pastor. No family should ever have to go through what they’ve gone through. It started when two parole officers arrived at Jay’s mother’s house to serve a warrant—Jay had been living in the house during the pandemic. When the officers arrived Jay became angry. He said he had a gun. In response, the officers made a series of decisions that resulted in the Capital Region Emergency Services Team (CREST)—a militarized SWAT team—coming to the house. Despite an extended negotiation with CREST, four officers gunned Jay down as he exited the house. What many don’t know is that Jay’s mother and step-father assured police multiple times that he was unarmed, and that he suffered from PTSD. They offered multiple times to bring Jay out of the house. Officers ignored them. Section 18 of LCO 3471 would require each municipal police department to complete an evaluation of the feasibility and potential impact of the use of social workers for the purpose of responding to calls for assistance. The parole officers who approached Jay on April 2nd didn’t need a SWAT team. Given what Jay’s parents were saying, the presence of a social worker could have made all the difference. Yes, Jay would have had to face consequences for violating parole. But he would still be alive to do so. His family would not be living with the emotional, psychological and spiritual horror of this police killing. Their house would not be riddled with bullet holes.

Some argue that LCO 3471 punishes all police due to the actions of a few “bad apples.” I disagree. The problem we face is a set of assumptions, practices and structures within police departments that have, for too long, resulted in over-policing of Black and other people of color communities. These results—which ultimately lead to incarceration rates way out of proportion to relative population size—are well-documented. The provisions in LCO 3471 address many of these underlying assumptions, practices and structures. As such, if enacted into law, it will make policing in Connecticut not only safer and more reliable for Black and other people of color communities; it will make policing safer and more reliable for police.

LCO 3471 may not be perfect yet, but I affirm the spirit in which it was drafted. At Black Lives Matter rallies, we chant “hands up, don’t shoot” and “I can’t breathe.” These words speak to the reality that policing as we know it all too often fails to serve Black and other people of color communities well. By taking this reality seriously, LCO 3471 will enable police to better serve

and protect all Connecticut residents regardless of racial identity. You, our elected state officials, have the opportunity to be leaders for racial justice in Connecticut. And you have the opportunity to position Connecticut as a national leader for racial justice. I urge you to take the bold step, the moral step—If not for yourselves and your families, then for Jay Soto and his family. Please vote in favor of LCO 3471.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Josh Pawelek