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**Title:** Director

**Organization or Agency:** Stop Solitary Ct

**Topic:** Meeting Date Not Listed

NA

### **Testimony:**

To the CAC and ombuds, Atty DeV Vaughn Ward: I am submitting a follow up testimony after last evening's attempt to speak to my experience at Manson Youth facility. I was very anxious because I wanted to get as much of my experience as I could on record within 3 minutes and because it was a real struggle I was thrown off track. First let me say, the impact of the experience continues to be with me. I was grateful for the opportunity to tour the youth facility for over 3 hours. Now it is difficult to sleep because it triggered so much pain from the past, sealed in my psyche. Being in that environment took me back to how my son's life was forever changed after a short period of incarceration. At age 16 he was arrested for breach of peace and threatening. It was his first arrest, not yet convicted of anything and not handling the abuse from staff well which led to several disciplinary tickets which then led to him being placed in Northern Supermax on the day he turned 17. He was in there for a few months before I was able to get him out, yet the damage done to him in that place of torture nearly killed the young boy that entered the system and left him scarred for life. My young son, who prior to incarceration was a songwriter and hip-hop entertainer was broken and all of us who love him have lived with those broken parts for decades after. The tour at Manson Youth unexpectedly reopened those wounds. I wanted to tour Manson because it was a part of the "conditions of confinement" report that was missing and for me, our young children 15-21 are the most vulnerable in a system closed to public scrutiny, so I requested a tour to check it out for myself. How our children are being treated is so important to me because I witnessed the damage that could be done and did not want to see another child's life destroyed due to incarceration, if I could prevent it. In the end each child will be returned home and if mistreated, neglected, and severely isolated, he will likely be a threat to the safety of his family and community. He will likely have developed mental illness which includes depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, psychosis, if not a more serious mental disorder. Psychiatrists have informed us, the younger a child is when facing this kind of trauma, the more likely he is at risk of not being able to recover from the abuse and torture. Between Manson and Northern my son was irreparably harmed. That has kept me dedicated to this work. I can't unknow what I know. I can't walk away from this. We have a lot of work to do. We have not yet scratched the surface of addressing how our children heal from all the trauma they have faced living in neglected and impoverished communities where mainstream society tells them in unspoken language that they don't matter. It's why they are wreaking havoc in their homes and communities. Many times their reckless behavior is the only attention they receive. It's a cry for help yet our response is punishment. During the tour I spoke with officers and a warden who seem genuinely committed to the wellbeing of youth in their custody. Several were intentional in engaging them. Others spent the time in the office space. I met the individual in charge of programming, and she said "most of these kids are really great kids. Most of the officers I met were welcoming and very engaging. The energy from a very few were more standoffish, as expected. There were about 300 youth, and as expected, were primarily African American and Latino. I wondered, where are Caucasian youth being housed? It's not only African American and Latino youth breaking the law. It truly is a stark reality of the racialized criminal justice system in Ct. I toured one unit where youth were playing basketball, video games, doing laundry in open spaces. These were defined as "privileged" for the well behaved. Other units were populated by youth in tiny spaces with a metal bed, toilet and sink, locked behind steel doors. As we toured, I saw the faces of some of those youth, standing at the door, some getting the attention of the warden to request something. I questioned how much time was spent locked in those spaces, so tight I would be claustrophobic. On each unit which can hold 10 people was one shower, 2 video units for visiting, 2 phones, and I saw one child locked in a cage on a phone call. I asked about mental health provision because it is very much a necessity in these places. No mental health staff on third shift or weekends. One psychiatrist on call during those times who covers the entire state. With mental health

being compromised that fact is extremely troubling, yet unless prison culture shifts to a more humane setting it will be very difficult to get professional staff. To have doctors prescribing medication for youth they have not seen in person is criminal and could prove deadly. I imagine they are being paid top dollar for unprofessionalism. When people matter, this behavior would not be tolerated. I was excited to see body scanners in place and operational because it would mean our young people no longer have to endure the humiliation and degradation of forced nudity, defined as strip searches. One less harm done to them under the guise of safety and security. The administrative guide talked about the things they wanted to do to make the place more like home and needed the support in getting the resources they need to do so. They talked about the politics that get in the way of them doing what they would like to do beginning with increasing the size of living spaces. It's gray with gray steel furniture. It's definitely a prison, not a place for healing and addressing trauma so many likely copes with on a daily basis. Not a place sending a message, "you matter". I want to help support our children in a way that those who have not lived their experience can truly relate. I asked for the volunteer forms and now 48 hours later I am still feeling the pain and recognizing I can't function in that space without it impacting my mental and physical health. The tour ended for me when we were standing around talking and a mouse ran across the floor, another reality of the conditions these children face, rodents running around in their living space. I was immediately traumatized and couldn't get out of there fast enough. I thought about the youth forced to adapt to this unhealthy environment because they can't leave. Ct being among the wealthiest state in the nation can do so much better by our children, if only enough people cared and had the will to do so. In a system with over half a billion dollars in funding these poor conditions of confinement should not be acceptable. While people place all the blame on the shoulders of the commissioner I look to the highest level. Corruption, neglect, mismanagement, thrive when those at the highest level of leadership tolerates it. DOC has at least 3 levels of oversight, governor, legislators and ombuds office. It begins at the top with the person who elevates, nominates and makes appointments. Disappointing is the fact our ombuds is limited to making recommendations, unenforceable recommendations. It's the legislators and governor's office who have the power to enforce better conditions and just as the PROTECT Act is law if leadership does not enforce it, laws become meaningless pieces of paper. When the former commissioner began to initiate change within DOC he did so with the backing of the governor. Following the change in governor, conditions plummeted, neglect, abuse and death became common. There's plenty of blame around yet the leadership at the top shapes the climate and sends a clear message what he (or she) will tolerate and what they will not. Ct taxpayers deserve and should demand better because these decisions are made in their name. Silence is acceptance, making one complicit. Our children deserve a better outlook on life.