

Testimony for the Connecticut Correction Advisory Committee

Thank you to the members of the Correction Advisory Committee and the Office of the Correction Ombudsman for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Denise Paley, I am the Co-President of NAMI Shoreline, a member of the DMHAS Advisory Committee and I am the mother of Ellis Tibere. Ellis has been incarcerated since he turned 18. He is now 24. Over the 2,216 days he has spent in custody, he has witnessed and personally endured repeated trauma.

You will hear from others about the deplorable conditions inside our correctional facilities: the lack of access to fresh air and natural light, the poor quality of food, and the excessive lockdowns. Stories of extreme neglect, a system with a disproportionate number of deaths by suicide and suicide attempts. An environment unfit for rehabilitation.

Today, I want to focus on something that is both less visible and equally damaging: the absence of meaningful programming. Incarceration in Connecticut wastes human potential. We fund a corrections system that claims to support recovery and reentry. At MYI, my son had limited access to vocational activities. In the 2,216 days he has been incarcerated, he has not had access to a single educational program. He has followed every protocol, submitted every request, and still he is ignored. Like thousands of others, he is denied even the most basic intellectual stimulation.

And yet, when he is released, a condition of his parole is that he must remain employed. After nearly a decade of doing absolutely nothing, he is expected to enter the workforce as if he has been prepared for it. It is unreasonable and it is absurd.

The June 2024 Connecticut State Reentry Report makes the consequences of this neglect painfully clear:

- 34% of people leaving DOC custody still have a serious mental health disorder
- 74% require nursing care
- 65% do not have a high school diploma

These outcomes are not accidental. They are the predictable result of a system that withholds the very tools people need to succeed.

Educational programming is one of the most effective ways to reduce recidivism and support successful reentry. College-level courses are funded by the Second Chance Pell Grant. Yet as of October 2024, only 323 incarcerated people were enrolled in “higher education” courses, (includes college, Adult basic ed, GED and vocational training) despite more than 3,000 being eligible and considered college ready.

We are told that DOC is short-staffed and lacks space. There is no good reason for this. DOC suffers from a deeply dysfunctional culture that harms both incarcerated people and staff. Low staffing and unprepared officers are symptoms of poor leadership, not inevitability. And as for space, stop overcrowding outdated facilities and create environments that support rehabilitation. The funding exists. This system costs taxpayers roughly \$1.5 billion a year when accounting for the FY2024 budget, overtime, liabilities, and lawsuits. Who is tracking how these dollars are used?

Finally, 95% of incarcerated people will return to our communities. Does anyone care about the condition in which they are released? Connecticut's recidivism rate is about 44% within three years, and the rearrest rate is 79% within five years. These numbers are not destiny. They are the result of choices to underinvest in rehabilitation, education, and mental health.

We can do better. We must do better. Meaningful programming, education, and recovery services should not be optional when they are essential to public safety, fiscal responsibility, and human dignity.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Denise Paley
DMHAS Advisory Board
Co-President NAMI Shoreline
Mother of Incarcerated Person