



Testimony on the Ombuds Annual Report on Conditions of Confinement

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January 29, 2026

Members of the Correction Advisory Committee:

My good friend and caged colleague whom I've never met, Justin S, said in his testimony that prison is not a secret society. But I say it's a secret society that allows what goes on behind those impenetrable walls to continue. The walls I'm talking about are not made of brick and mortar, steel and barbed wire. They are the walls we've erected in our minds—that don't allow us to see and admit the whole truth of the foundations upon which our country was built and our carceral system is maintained.

We all know it was built on the attempted genocide of indigenous people and the theft of their land, the kidnapping, enslavement and subjugation of the people of Africa, the coerced labor of immigrants, and the exploitation of lands and human bodies of color everywhere—all justified by a convenient theory of white supremacy—and that those same forces are desperately trying to maintain their dominance at home and abroad today.

I speak of this shameful history today—in a hearing about conditions of confinement in our prison fortresses—because the two are inextricably linked. Enslavement, exploitation, racial capitalism, and white supremacy are very much alive—are the lifeblood of our current carceral punishment system. If we don't understand and confront that, we will continue to chip away at the wrong edifice, and our criminal justice “reform” efforts will only reinforce the existing racist carceral punishment system. We must see the real function of this system in our society, if we are to see what we must do moving forward.

If we really want to deal honestly with this monstrous creation some call a “criminal justice” system, we must first fully acknowledge, and then begin to repair, the immense harm we have caused those we have murdered, subjugated and exploited, and their descendants, here within our own militarily constructed borders and around the world. And then we must come to see the role this

punishment system plays in maintaining the capitalist system that dominates and to varying degrees oppresses us all.

The elephant in the room is this secret that everyone knows but few dare to speak. But it's not an elephant. It's a pistol, it's handcuffs, water cannons, dogs, pepper spray, 4-point restraints, border patrols, ICE, a missile, a nuclear weapon. It's the brute force that our government quickly resorts to when more socially acceptable methods fail. See what's happening now in Minneapolis and across the country.

We ask those we manage to capture in our socially, economically and legally constructed nets and throw behind those physical walls—we ask them to be accountable for their actions. But how can our society ask them that—ask them the impossible—when our society will not be accountable to them for ITS actions—for the brute force which continues to enable the racial capitalist system to exploit them for the ever increasing enrichment of the wealthy few who control it. And by the nets I mean, for example, the “market economy,” “law and order,” the “war on drugs,” “three strikes,” “urban renewal,” “tough on crime,” ‘broken windows,’ “redlining,” “welfare reform,” “stop and frisk” etc etc etc — along with the realities of racism, poverty and militarism.

Throwing more guards into those gulags won't solve the problem—it will only make it worse—or better, depending what your aim is. Only a complete change of culture will bring about the changes my captive brethren are demanding.

CT has paid for all kinds of officials to go to European countries to study their relatively enlightened, rehabilitative prison systems. They come back and say they've seen the light, and they'll change things. But nothing changes because for those who hold the power, it's all working exactly right—you can't have a functioning racial capitalist society that keeps them in power without a militarist carceral surveillance police state with highly profitable gulags to keep everyone else in line.

Ignoring medical symptoms until limbs are lost or cancer spreads. Maintaining an impossible to navigate grievance system that thwarts all attempts at obtaining relief. Disgusting, nutritionally deficient food that leads to obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. Withholding mental health treatment, training, programs, education—any meaningful ways to heal from the trauma all captives hold. Retaliation, lockdowns, mail theft, strip searches, being treated as non-persons. White supremacist signs and symbols on the doors of DOC “leaders”— Is the DOC commissioner going to pretend he didn't know about them? Ask yourself, what is the cultural vision of someone who would allow that?

None of this is new. And it's not just in CT. Nationwide, it's how we treat those whom our society threw away long before they did the thing that landed them in cages. Why is it that, despite all we know about rehabilitation, all the hype about moving toward a more humanist, European style prison system, the situation

here just gets more and more punitive? And worse, as Europe moves toward fascism, their carceral systems are looking more and more like ours.

We were horrified at what we saw happen to Renée Goode and Alex Pretti. But it's not so different from what our incarcerated comrades face behind the walls every day at the hands of their captors. Think of J'Allen Jones (RIP), Ronnie Talbot (RIP). Think of formerly incarcerated comrade Timothy Townsend, and incarcerated comrades Chris Calhoun, José Garcia, and Guillermo Serrano—to name just a few of those I know who are fighting for justice for the retaliatory violence they suffered at the hands of the DOC. The only difference is the guards didn't shoot—not yet anyway.

How can those in power know so much about how to heal and rehabilitate people, how to prepare them to successfully reenter society, and yet maintain a culture and system that only makes them worse? And the only possible answer can be—they don't want to rehabilitate them, they want them to return to the gulags and keep them full—because that's how to maintain the jobs, profits, and dominant capitalist power structure.

Who is to blame? The governor, the legislators, the courts, the media, ourselves—all who know and do nothing—or choose to not know. But the media controls what the public thinks, and the corporate capitalists control what the media prints and the legislators legislate.

The public is groomed by the corporate-controlled media to criminalize those who have been caught in the net—while failing to convict and punish those who cause the real harm—corporations and the government officials who do their bidding.

Why is this hearing being held in front of this committee, which has no power or authority to do anything? Why isn't it being held before the Judiciary Committee itself, and how many of those members are here today? Where are our elected representatives, who SHOULD have the moral sense to be outraged at what is in the report and what caged people are saying about the appalling conditions of their confinement—and the supposed ability to change them?? Why did all the legislators I invited here have other, more important things to do?

I fervently want the rights and worth of my incarcerated brothers and sisters to be respected. I want them to be healthy and safe, and to have the tools they need to thrive upon release. But more than that, I want us to tear down all the walls that separate captor and captive, and to build a world where all can thrive together.